No. zero

FURRY WORLDWIDE

Stories, Essays
Snippets and Comics

• BY FURRIES
AND ABOUT FURRIES

WORLDWIDE
FAYS
number zero

18+
BLOOD
SWEAR WORDS
AND
NAKED TITS

Tall Tails Worldwide
NUMBER ZERO

Azon Bobcat
Concept, Organization, Graphic Design, Logo Design, Lettering, Document Assembly, Cover Art, Editing.

Siik
Concept, Organisational Setup, Additional Support.

Halcifer
Concept, Additional Support, Spiritual Leader.

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Traditional Artist and Designer, obsessed with detailed art and talking animals, forever in search for meaning in his art through the medium of comics.

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Ayrshire, Scotland

Tabsy

Born and raised by the seafront on the Scottish west coast, Tabsy is an amateur writer and video editor. Working in the legal field, and with both a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Law, he takes as much influence as he can from his profession and produces mostly crime fiction and thrillers. He has plans to finish his first novel, Automatic Sunshine, sometime in the near future.

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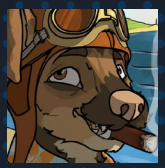

South Western Ontario

Victor Rourke

An aspiring writer, who dabbles from adventure to military fiction, and is currently working on their first novel! He hopes you have a good day eh!

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LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Stooser S.

Spain

Very much in love with "hard sci-fi", a la Jules Verne, so you may see quite a few of these themes in his work, along with, of course, our favourite fuzzy little two-legged animals.

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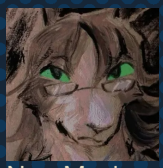
Gone Hollywood

Florida, United States

Hollywood is an amateur artist and writer knee-deep in Topeka, a complicated mess of a fictional universe. Big fan of contemporary history, science-fiction, Americana, classic rock, film, and Oingo Boingo. Interchangeable moose and painted dog.

↘ x.com/HollywoodNear

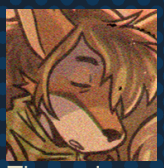


Cake Sanchez

New Mexico

Cake Sanchez is a spry dutch rabbit from Albuquerque. His work has been featured on HAD, BRUISER, ExPat Press, Blood+Honey, and others. Give him a carnation and he'll follow you anywhere.

↘ kodakrabbit everywhere

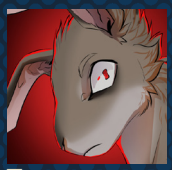


Milo

The god forsaken hellscape known as Alberta, Canada

Amateur writer and radio host and freelance photographer, working in the Southern Albertian music scene. Plans to study archeology and finish at least one of it's long term projects in the coming year

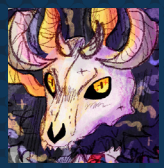
↘ coyotetails.bsky.social



Henry Helwig

Texas

Perpetually burnt out amateur writer, his skills are middling but his passion is pure. Forever fan of classic science fiction, cleverly done fantasy and settings that find time to focus on the seemingly inconsequential details.



Classic Cheese

Passaic New Jersey

Fashion and historical enthusiast; creative hobbyist. Particular towards sewing, art, and writing. Recent graduate trying to find another purpose or project to keep sane. Be kind and be fabulous, and do what you love in style.

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“I Am Fed Up With Nothing Ever Being Finished”

Origins Of Tall Tails Worldwide.

A Foreword by Azon Bobcat

NFAA potch sketch based on Muad’ Dog’s description. Half-Dead Honey Badger head biting a heap of typewriter keys.

Finalized drawing with more anatomically accurate head, a halo of pen nibs added to reinforce the analog nature of writing.

Final NFAA Patch design. Embroidery is drawn by hand. Note the literall translation of the motto in Pig Latin.

This project got started some time after I was generously invited to a Discord Server for Furry Writers by one of my former clients, **Halcifer**. It was a strange offer, since I had never written anything substantial in my life, yet the Coyote deemed me worthy enough just based on a limited selection of my comic book works. However, as things usually go in such grassroots communities of enthusiasts, a lot of people were working on things (or were promising to) and yet very little was actually done. Not to discredit the whole group of course, a certain ***Smug Canine*** was able to finish an entire book series by the time we even got to a half-decent organization in regards to this zine.

Either way, my ADHD-affected brain could not take it anymore - everyone were promising to do things, but nothing was ever done, things got announced, promised, hinted at, and yet I was almost none of it. Wherever if it was canceled, restructured, scrapped and reworked in to an another future project, to me personally it does not matter - none of the stories got told and I was sick of it.

So I came up with a devious, selfish plan to make all of my fellow writers enter a, frankly, symbiotic deal - I proposed that we will write a self-contained short story, from beginning to an end, withing a timespan of one year. They would get to know how it feels to finally finish something, hone their skills on a smaller scale where they can work out all the kinks better than win a huge opus magnum, and will get to see their work in a compilation along with others. And I would finally get my dopamine hit from finally reading

works of all of these promising writers. I also had to contribute.

I did not do it alone, of course. It would not be possible without both **Halcifer** (with whom we basically formed the concept based on our collective annoyance) and especially to **Siik**, who handled the first very important stages of organizational process and even gave me grammar advice.

Along with supporting and adding to the idea of a writing challenge, **Hal** did a lot of iconographic brainstorming with me, coming up with an idea of using an infamously resilient Honey Badger as a mascot, whom I later named Meles Malice, after designing him to be half-dead yet still living. He also came up with a slogan "*Not Fucking Around Anymore*", abbreviation of which, NFAA, was used as a code-word of the work done for this zine. He also came up with an idea to make a military unit style patch featuring the badger and a slogan, which I also designed, translating the motto in to Pig Latin.

Before we start, I also want to explain the "*Worldwide*" aspect of our project: with how divided the world is right now, I personally find it very endearing, that against all odds, people with differing world views, ages and from opposite sides of the planet could come together and make something for each other, just based on a shared love for talking animals.

Anyway, with all that said - it is my honor to present: stories, articles and snippets by my fellow Tall Tails members. We hope you enjoy.

First Tall Tails logo done as a proof of concept.

Original rule sheet for Tall Tails Worlwide Short Story Challange. As you can see, the original one-year time limit got extended quite a bit.

STORIES

Jumpers
by Tabsy

It seemed as if the murky, freezing water below was calling to him personally. A quiet taunt. A gentle goading to take the plunge. The coyote grit his teeth as his grip tightened around the frigid metal guardrail. A spasm in his wrist caused him to jerk and his heart dropped as he almost lost his footing.

He'd found himself a dark spot. One which reeked of iron and rust. All it took was a little hop up from the pedestrian walkway when no one was looking. An unlit patch of abyss, right in the middle of one of the busiest road bridges in the state. It gave him a weird feeling to be so near to his final moments as commuters rushed home, totally unaware. Despite teetering over the edge of oblivion, his instincts had forced him to keep in-line with the norm. He'd placed his work bag down to his side carefully, buttoned the top button on his shirt and he'd even bothered to fix his hair.

A shaky exhale rattled out of his throat. It was all going fine. He was fine.

As fine as a man on the edge could be at least. He'd expected that he'd be more existential by now, contemplating the great mystery of life as he rushed towards the wall of water till it smashed him into nothing. He felt disappointed that nothing he did could shift his mind from the mundane. Had he left the right forms on his boss's desk that afternoon? Did he remember to wave goodbye to the receptionist like he always did? Even now, he was beginning to worry about next week's performance review.

Next week.

His teeth bared as a nervous smirk crossed his muzzle. There was no next week. There was no next month. There was no tomorrow. There was now. And of course, the next few minutes or so as he psyched himself up to let go. It frightened him to think that the only time in the world he had left was the same amount he'd use to take a piss and check his watch in the office. A pang of melancholy rippled through him.

With a sigh he shuffled his feet. The cold was starting to creep in and his hand was going numb on the railing. This was it. The time was now. No turning back. After an eternity he finally loosened his grip on the railing and took one last look towards the city skyline.

He immediately recoiled in fear.

Pale blue eyes peered at him through the darkness of the upper gantry. He scrambled for the comfort of the railing again like a life preserver in the vast sea. In turn, the distant gaze softened apologetically. Its owner's apologetic voice carried on the sea wind.

"My bad, man. Sorry!"

The unseen figure stepped forward into the light. It was a malamute, who stood at around the same height as himself. She wore a displeased expression on her sharp face.

He cleared his throat and raised his voice to shout over the wind. "It's fine, don't worry about it."

"Are you gonna be done soon?"

He cocked his head to the side, unsure of what she'd just said. "What?"

She cupped her hands around the end of her muzzle. "I said, are you gonna jump or what? C'mon I don't have all day."

A chill ran down his spine. His maternal grandmother had spent most of her baby-sitting nights telling him old myths and other supernatural tales around the fire. This felt like another one of them. If this was to be his end, the coyote

reasoned it was better to be straight to the point. “Are you Death?”

The malamute simply looked back at him, confused. “Huh?”

“Like, do you want my soul or some kind of bargain or?”

A huff of air. The dog smiled. “No, dude, I’m waiting for you to get out of my spot. It’s my turn next.”

“Oh.”

She took one hand out from the pocket of her coat and gestured towards the burning horizon. “Sun’s setting, you’ll get a nice view while you’re falling if you go now.”

“Are you trying to motivate me?”

She shrugged, nonplussed. “Maybe.”

He looked back to the slow-flowing water beneath. Inside, his mind cried out but his body wouldn’t co-operate. It felt as if he were glued to the guardrail.

His lead feet refused to propel him forwards. He groaned in frustration. It was just like getting laid, full of bravado and confidence till the girl walks in the room.

“Not happening?” There was an almost teasing tone to her voice.
He leaned back and sat against the railing, giving his shaking legs a rest. “Not happening.”

The coyote watched as she gracefully traipsed her way across the girders to sit on the same section as him, a few feet away. She moved like she knew the path well. “I get that.”

Glimmers of orange sunset peeked through the metal and shed some light on where they were sitting. Even in the cold of winter, it made him feel a little bit warmer. The lack of sleep from the night before was rapidly catching up to him, he felt his eyelids droop. Now he longed for his warm bed rather than the icy chasm that awaited him.

“What’s dragged you up here anyways? Did a girl break your heart?” The malamute paused briefly.

“Or a boy.”

He made a dismissive gesture with his hand. What hadn’t dragged him up here? The stressors were too hard to pinpoint. Nor did he feel like giving his life story to a total stranger. “I’m exhausted.” He turned to face her, trying to avoid her piercing stare. “Why’re you here?”

“Work sucks. My family sucks. Everything sucks.” She mimicked the same motion he’d made with her hand. “I come up here after work sometimes to listen to the wind and try to psyche myself into it.”

“Do you feel psyched into it right now?”

“Not particularly.”

The railing was beginning to feel more akin to a park bench in the middle of the city. A sensation of calm washed over him. The brief companionship was soothing. The coyote began gently swinging his feet as they chatted. “What is it you do?”

“I’m an engineer. I do work for the transit authority. You?”

“Accounts. My office is on the 12th floor over there.” She followed his pointing finger to a clean, shining high-rise to the right of the bay. From this distance he could still make out the faint silhouettes of his co-workers doing overtime.

The dog cringed. “No wonder you’re up here.”

“You’re telling me.” He rubbed his cold hand across his eye wearily. “I don’t even like math.”

She gave a thin smile and a short laugh. “You picked a real shitty career for a guy that doesn’t like numbers.” He noticed she’d started to swing her legs along with him. “What’s your name anyways.”

"Karl. Like the fashion designer."

"Lucretia. Like the First Lady." She outstretched her hand towards him and he shook it weakly.

"Pleasure."

"Likewise."

The wind picked up and began to howl. Paired with the sound of rushing traffic it began to get nauseating to hear. He could lower himself back down to the walkway in an instant. Go home and live another day. Yet he still didn't know if he wanted to. A small clanging sound drew his attention. Lucretia was tapping her bootheel against the gantry rail to get his attention.

"You wanna get a drink or something?"

"What? Now?"

"Oh I'm sorry, did you want me to wait till tomorrow?" She grinned, clearly enjoying herself. "C'mon, beats being up here. At least for tonight."

With his final moment of hesitation came a sudden burst of strength. His body was willing at last, he could do it! He knew he should do it, but now his heart wasn't into it. He sat still for a minute, listening to the wind with his eyes closed. "Fuck it, why not."

*****

The morning after a night of drinking was never a pleasant one. Karl knew himself that he was fit and healthy. For the most part. Yet after a few drinks too many his kidneys always seemed to ache in the most uncomfortable manner. Groggily, he bashed at the screeching alarm clock that had woken him out of his deep slumber. He didn't care if it snoozed or shut off entirely, he just needed it to stop. Once it had ceased wailing at last, he flicked a small switch on the back. Even the planned suicide hadn't stopped him setting it yesterday morning out of sheer reflex and here he was continuing the cycle. Flinging his shivering legs over the side of the bed, he rose to his feet with a stretch. He couldn't quite

shake the feeling that something was off as he did so. The realisation didn't hit him until he turned back toward the bed and saw the pillows on the right hand side had been re-arranged and sunken down. He blinked hard. He never slept on the right hand side.

He leaned back on the bedside table idly, pondering the pillowcases. A glass of water he'd forgotten about clinked dangerously close to the edge of the wood as he put his weight against it. He turned to look down at it. A water-stained note that had been acting as a coaster looked back. Graceful cursive hand-writing greeted him warmly.

Had to run. Thanks for the great night :)
-L

The coyote put it out of his mind in an instant. He stored it at the back of his head like a cassette. The tape of everyday life played forward unphased, breakfast; dental care; fur care; dressing; heading out the door; commuting. It was an endless, comforting loop. A loop so engrained in his system that it often felt like his days were little more than dreams in which he was a passenger.

Today was no longer one of those days.

It wasn't until he was sitting behind his desk, logging on for the day, that his mind started buzzing. A total rewrite of an old, dormant system which rattled him to his core.

"I slept with a girl last night." His fingers gripped a styrofoam cup tightly in his hand, threatening to split it. The chilled mineral water dulled the pain in his insides.

"You what?" The rabbit across from him choked on her drink. She peered up at him incredulously from below. "Are you serious? Is that why you're acting so weird this morning?"
The coyote's brow furrowed in confusion. "Am I acting strange?"

"You've been all smiles since you came in." She cleared her throat. The grey rabbit wiped at the corner of her wetted lips with her thumb. "I thought you weren't a virgin, was she really that good?"

Karl watched as two of his co-workers across the office half-turned their ears towards the water dispenser. “I’m not a virgin.” He spoke in a quiet grumble.

“Not anymore.” She interjected, grinning.

He felt the need to protest and defend himself, unwilling to go down in the history books as a 28-year-old virgin. “I wasn’t anyways. Look, it was a weird night.”

“Oh yeah? How come?”

A dull throb in his head reminded him of his mistakes. “I don’t remember it well. She offered to get a drink with me. Then we were at the bar together. Then I woke up the next day. The rest is just a blur of shapes and colours.”

There was a sudden, stern look of concern on the rabbit’s face.

“Did you get drugged?”

Another pair of ears from across the office seemed to tilt in their direction.

“Can you please at least try to keep it down!” He strained his voice in a whispering shout. “I did not get drugged, Stefanie.”

Her eyebrow cocked upwards. “Then maybe it was a wet dream?”

He rolled his eyes. “Wet dreams don’t leave notes on your bedside table.”

The rabbit hummed to herself for a moment. Then she tapped her cup against his with a soft scrape. A toast. “I told you that you should be more open to hook-ups.”

By now he was aware of more and more of his colleagues turning their heads in his direction. The tall coyote hunched down as low as he could. Short walled cubicles allowed every sound to travel across the floor from wall to wall. Anyone who stood higher than the cubicles could easily see the entire floor at a glance. At the very least, it allowed for magnificent views of the water and natural light to flood in at all times. Yet despite all the beauty, he’d rather be seen and not

heard.

"How'd you meet her anyways?"

"Subway."

"The sandwich shop?"

A heavy pang of annoyance. He glared at her as she looked innocently at him. "51st Street. She told me she's an engineer. We bumped into each other. Got talking, y'know?"

The rabbit put a hand on her hip. "So in the span of a few hours, you managed to sweep some random maintenance worker off her feet and get her back to your place? I'm impressed."

At this point, he was sure the entire office was listening in on them. He'd had enough. Karl looked down at his watch and it blinked back up at him. 10:15am. He made a start, walking towards the elevator and beckoning for Stef to follow.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going for breakfast, are you coming with me or not?"

Without another word she caught up to him almost immediately.

*****

The coyote's mouth watered as he sunk his teeth greedily into his bagel once more. It was a simple order and the same one he always took day after day. Pastrami and cream cheese.
He skipped all the vegetables, all the fancy dressings, and took it as he felt it best. Meat and dairy. The only main food groups he truly wanted and needed. Without fail, he would walk into the deli for it and they'd have it prepped in near seconds. Even they could see clear as day that he was a creature of habit. The deli served as a familiar haunt for Stef and himself whenever he felt the need to shirk his responsibilities for the day. After all, what were they going to do? Tell his father? He smiled to himself. The old man owed him too much for his mis-

steps, he'd never fire his own son.

"So, the girl? What's she look like?"

The rabbit broke him out of his own head. She nibbled on half of a lettuce and sun-dried tomato bagel, waiting for him to continue. He shrugged, trying to appear casual.

"Malamute, roughly my height. There's not really much else to it."

Stef rolled her eyes, clearly displeased. "Jesus Chirst, did you even look or talk to her at all or did you just jump her?"

He brushed the accusation off dismissively. "Like I said, I don't remember much."

"Okay, what's her name?"

"Lucretia."

Somewhere a street over there was a tremendous bang, followed by the sharp screeching of tyres. Another dull thud followed, soon chased by as a cacophony of car horns in sync. Both of them turned their heads but couldn't see round the corner. A few people had taken off jogging towards the scene.

"Never a dull day in Manhattan."

"Ain't that the truth."

"So, Lucretia huh? What, is she a grandma or?" There was a hint of teasing in the rabbit's voice.

"She's in her 20's. I think."

"You think?"

"Oh I'm sorry, do you check the ID of every boy you sleep with? I thought it was supposed to be rude to ask a lady her age."

She playfully swiped at his arm. “Easy, easy. Hey I didn’t mean anything by it. Just making sure you weren’t getting a cougar sinking her teeth into you.”

“And so what if I was?”
The rapidly approaching sound of sirens filled the air. An ambulance practically slid round the street corner towards the source of the earlier calamity. They could hear both doors open and slam shut in rapid succession.

“Fuck, I hope everyone’s okay.” The rabbit mused aloud.

Karl sat the remaining third of his bagel back down and rose from the table. Curiosity had gotten the better of him. “I’m gonna go check it out. I’ll be right back.”

He hopped over the small chain that fenced off the outdoor seating area from the outside world and took off down the street in a light jog. However he found himself stopped dead in his tracks once he finally got a glimpse past the corner of the street. A white sedan was crushed up against a lamppost by a black SUV. Their respective drivers, now bloodied, were arguing on the sidewalk. A stark white cat, her fur now matted with red from dozens of small cuts, kept poking her finger into a weasel’s chest as he snarled at her. A tired beat cop stood in between them, trying to keep them apart.

In the middle of the street were two paramedics and a gaggle of concerned bystanders. An elderly fox was splayed out in the middle of the road on his back, eyes staring up at the sun and panting heavily. Every wheeze sounded pained as the EMT’s tried to vainly reassure him. Someone else on the sidewalk had started to cry.

And then he saw her.

Lingering at the edge of an alleyway, shrouded in the murky shadow. She hadn’t seen him and seemed to be caught in watching the scene unfold. She wore the same heavy coat that she had on last night when they’d met. He wondered how she wasn’t boiling with both it and her dense fur. He shuddered as a lost memory flooded back into his head. God her fur was soft. He needed to talk to her. Now.

Somewhat hesitantly, he shuffled down towards the entrance of the alley while

the chaos on the street continued. The weasel had taken a swipe at the cat and was now, rather aggressively, being placed into handcuffs. Karl moved slowly past an abandoned newspaper stand, whose owner was presumably out lingering in the gathered crowd. When he felt he was close enough, he cleared his throat so as to not scare her. Her head whipped round like a shot. Despite his best efforts, he'd still managed to take her by surprise. For a passing moment, he saw nothing but pure hatred and fury in her eyes. His heart stopped and the air in his lungs turned to ice. Then, a look of recognition crossed her face. Hatred quickly turned to warmth. Sharp teeth peeked out at him as she smiled.

''Well, this is a surprise. I was just thinking about you. What're you doing skulking around here?"

Butterflies hatched in his chest at the mere mention of him lingering in her thoughts. "I could ask you the same thing."

''I'm on a break, aren't you supposed to be up there?" She didn't wait for an answer. "Ach, whatever. I'm glad I ran into you."

Karl's legs felt weak. "Yeah. It's nice to see you again too."
There was a drawn out, somewhat awkward silence between them. Karl shuffled his feet on the concrete, unsure of what to say next. Lucretia took the lead for him without a word. Taking both her hands out of her pockets, she tightly wrapped them around his waist. Before he could make any form of protest, she pressed her muzzle against his. He returned the gesture. Her tongue tasted of peony as it ran gently over his own. The coyote's hands came to rest on her lower back as they swayed gently together in the October morning. Another door banged shut and caused them to break apart in a hurry. They both cleared their throats and looked past each other. The coyote scratched at his now burning cheek.

"Are you doing anything tonight?"

A mischievous smile tugged at the corners of her muzzle. She folded her arms in front of her. "Why do you ask?"

He subtly dug a claw into the side of his cheek, anything to keep him feeling grounded and brave. "I was thinking that we could go out for drinks again. Same place. If you'd like."

She sighed heavily, the smile faltering from her face. All the butterflies within him were threatening to die just as soon as they'd emerged. Surely she wouldn't kiss him and then say no, would she? "Look, no hard feelings. I usually try to just keep it to one night things." Lucretia hesitated as she caught his gaze again. "But. I'll see you at eight tonight, yeah?" Her soft smile returned and he was tentatively warm again.

They shared one final, lingering embrace and parted ways. His mind quickly turned from her to his rapidly cooling bagel on the deli table. He skirted away from the scene of the accident and half-expected to see her following along with him. Karl took a look over his shoulder before scrunching his face in confusion. It seemed as if she'd somehow vanished into thin air.

Stef was waiting for him as he rounded the corner and crossed back over the threshold to the deli's outdoor tables. He sat back down across from her as she made an open handed gesture.

"What happened?" She leaned across the table, eager to hear the news.

He threw out his arms joyfully. "You won't believe it. The girl from last night, she was right there!"

Her face tightened up in concern. "Please, for god's sake don't tell me your hookup got hit by a car."

"What? No, no, she was just in the alley nearby."

Her face screwed up a touch further. His answer seemed to have done little to relieve her. "Right, right. And the accident?"

"They're fine! I think? They seemed ok." The rabbit eyed him warily as the ambulance sped along the street, lights blazing and siren blaring. "We made plans. We're going for drinks at eight."

Stef kicked his shin under the table, hard. She adopted a mocking tone and imitated an old newscaster. "Picking up girls at the scene of an accident! Just how much lower will this accountant stoop to chase tail?"

The coyote yelped at the pain and pulled his leg away. “It’s not my fault I bumped into her!”

“I can’t believe this. You made evening plans at the scene of a car crash.” Stef raised her hand to hide a laugh. “You’re doing this in the most, you way possible!”

Her remark stung him, more so than he expected. “What do you mean I’m doing it in the most me way possible?” He could feel his voice wavering as he spoke.

Stef couldn’t hide her smile, now openly laughing at him and turning a few heads from the inside of the deli. “It’s like you never take the straightforward route, do you? Don’t you remember that goth girl, Heather?”

“She was a punk not a goth.”

“Six and half a dozen. Do you remember going to all her punk shows for a couple months to try and impress her?”

“Oh god forbid I try to get into the same things as someone I like! Where are you even going with this?”

“I’m saying you always pick the weird chicks! There’s at least five normal girls on our floor alone that would fuck you in the mail room, but no, they’re not good enough huh?”

He slammed his closed fist against the metal table. The rabbit didn’t so much as flinch. “I’m not fucking anyone in the mail room!” Heads across the street turned in his direction as he’d reached the limit of his patience. Noticing his mis-step, he covered his mouth with the length of his index finger. The rabbit laughed on and on, relentlessly. He rose back to his feet and grabbed his coat, face burning in embarrassment.

With a gasp, Stef caught her breath and followed suit. “Oh come on, I’m joking around! C’mon, don’t be mad.” The giggling betrayed her sincerity. Karl grumbled as he took a bite out of his, now stone cold, bagel.

He lied through his teeth, unconvincingly. “I’m not mad. It’s a Wednesday.”

"So?"

Getting his teeth a touch, he tried to set his anger aside in favour of professionalism. "So, we're going to be late for the team meeting. It's almost noon."

Now it was the rabbit's turn to protest. "Since when do you care? It's not like they can fire you."

"But they can fire you."

Stef simply scoffed as she picked up the remnants of her bagel. "They'd never. But alright." An elbow nudged into his side with force as she passed him, knocking the wind out of him. He followed along by her side begrudgingly, the harsh reality of his situation settling in. He'd never be demoted. He'd never be fired. No matter what he did, he was virtually untouchable.

So what was even the point in trying?

The team meeting came and went. A single sticky-note on his laptop's desktop provided him with everything he needed. Yes, his productivity was through the roof. No, he didn't have the capacity to pick up more work. Absolutely, he was happy where he was. They discussed strategy and financial goals for the quarter. Ironing out the finer details on how they could fleece the most from their clients. One of his co-workers, a wolf from the floor below, had suggested adding an initial "account assessment fee" for onboarding new clients. Internally he balked at the idea. Externally, he stood with the others and applauded when the time came. He rarely made any suggestions at company meetings, typically it just led to more work for little to no reward. Still, once he returned to his seat, he noticed his manager eyeing him curiously.

"Mr Lagermann, I was wondering if you'd be open to discussing something with us all here today."

Immediately his heart began to race. What was this? It wasn't serious enough to be said in private but it had enough weight to be tackled during a meeting. Dominic, the leopard who'd led the team for as long as he'd been there, simply grinned at him as he awaited an answer.

"Of course." *Fuck off.*

The leopard clicked his fingers. "Pop quiz. What important date is it within the next two weeks?"

All eyes turned to him. Almost instantly he felt beads of cold sweat begin to run down his back. Halloween? The reunification of Germany? The Cuban missile crisis? He gave a sideward glance to Stef, hoping that she'd throw him some sort of lifeline. His heart stopped when she looked just as confused as he did.

He tried to alleviate the pressure with a chuckle. "Gosh, the start of the next financial quarter?" His heart rose, he felt as if he'd saved it at the very last second. It fell back down again when the leopard shook his head.

"It's the birthday of one of our most important partners here at L&D LLP!"

Karl could feel his head tilt involuntarily in confusion. Why was it his business to discuss someone else's birthday? The realisation hit him like a speeding car just as everyone else in the room began to clue in as well.

"Ah! Yes. Yes, it's my father's birthday soon." He had entirely forgotten. He wasn't usually in the habit of remembering it, but to forget it in front of everyone else was a touch more embarrassing. He found that people who had good relationships with their parents never seemed to understand why it would slip his mind.

"As I'm sure you're also aware, his birthday week coincides with a visit to our office. There'll be a big meeting to celebrate the closing of a new client deal. I can't share any details yet but it'll be great for the firm." A heavy hand clapped onto his shoulder. "I was thinking that you could plan a birthday reception afterwards, what do you think?"

That's a terrible idea. "That's a great idea!" I don't know the slightest thing about the man. "I'll do my best to pick out the type of things that he likes."

Dominic beamed. Karl reckoned he was already thinking of all the potential kudos he could score for coming up with the idea. After all, even if it all went to

shit, you can't exactly place blame on the partner's son can you?

"I think a short speech would be a good idea as well, if you don't mind of course?" The leopard leaned toward him, a curious tone in his voice as if the coyote was in a position to say no to such a request. Oh he could certainly make a speech alright. A testament to his useless whelp of an absent father. For but a moment he imagined standing before a crowd like a stand-up comedian with a red curtain at his back. He'd regale them with the stories of the man who gave him nothing, nor acknowledged his existence until it became too inconvenient to ignore.

"More than happy to, Dom." He felt a blood vessel pulsate on the side of his head.
By the time he'd gotten back to his desk, he'd already been sent an email about it. The whole team had been cc'd in, both those above and below him. Karl was now the resident celebration planner. Anyone who wished to schmooze and make a great impression on the lead partner should head right to his son's desk and yap his ear off. That was how it read to him at least. He sighed and checked the clock at the bottom right of the screen. Another hour to go and he'd be free. Another hour to go and he could get ready for his date. Another hour to go before he could try and feel like a real person again. He looked forlornly at his inbox. Why did it matter so much to him? He worked himself to the bone for a position he'd never lose unless he downright tried to. Yet all his achievements were chalked up to the nepotism which shielded him. He closed the laptop screen and rose to his feet. It was time to get a coffee and waste the closing stage of the day. Lucretia crossed his mind again briefly.

And he felt genuinely happy.

*****

He checked his watch for the fourth time that minute. He was a punctual person, always had been and always would be. It was now five minutes past eight and she hadn't arrived. The fear that she'd stood him up encroached rapidly around the walls of his heart. He'd never been stood up before. Every girl he'd always dated had always been on time. Why wasn't she on time? Panic rose in his chest as he swallowed. He breathed out shakily as a curious patron shot him a glance from inside.

The street out front was busy and wet with rain. Across the way, an Italian restaurant he'd eaten at a handful of times was full to the brim. A couple of bored cabbies mingled outside, waiting for their drunken prey to approach. An ambulance flew around the corner, its lights and sirens blaring. As he watched it pass by, he felt a soft touch on his arm. He jolted away out of reflex and whipped his head around. There she stood, close to his side. He hadn't heard her approach. She still wore what appeared to be her work uniform, a navy jacket with a faded MTA badge on its shoulder. Her soft smile set him alight and dispelled all of his anxiety in an instant. She wrapped her arms around his waist. "Sorry, I got held back at work. Had to deal with something urgent." The coyote wondered what sort of urgent work an engineer even had to deal with. Did they have deadlines in the same way that he did? He'd have to ask her about it when they went inside. "You look great."

He felt a rush of blood to the head as his face steadily warmed up. He returned her embrace. He wasn't wearing anything special, it was only blue jeans and a shirt. Yet the comment delighted him all the same. Out in the road, another couple of ambulances sped past.
The bar itself wasn't the classiest place. With its dim lighting and plush seating it looked more akin to a low-end brothel. It wasn't trying too hard to impress and it didn't have to, the cheap drinks made up for that. He'd ordered a Heineken and she followed suit, all the while eyeing him up. "So, how was work?"

The coyote shrugged, taking his first sip of the beer that'd been placed in front of him. "It wasn't the best. They've got me planning an event for one of the bosses."
"Ah. Your dad?"

His brow furrowed. "How did you know?"

She smiled at him sheepishly. "You told me last time about how he runs some firm and that you can't stand him. Figured it'd be weird if they were making you plan the birthday of someone you don't know."

He moved to protest but relented before the words left his mouth. She wasn't wrong but he was somewhat embarrassed that he'd apparently dropped his woes on her when he was drunk. Instead he just nodded and laughed nervously. "Yeah, yeah that sounds about right." Thinking quickly, he pivoted the subject

towards her. “And how was your shift?”
“Busy, busy. Always tends to pick up this time of year. I think the cold does something to people. We’d had an accident at one of the stations so I had to be on-site for that.”
The coyote’s eyes widened. That explained why she was late. “Oh, shit, is everyone ok?”
She shrugged. “I did what I could, eased their pain a little.”

“You’re a first aid trained engineer?”

The malamute crossed one leg over the other and laughed. “What, something unbelievable about that?”

“That’s not what I’m saying!”

’’I didn’t always work in maintenance, I used to be a nurse.” A light punch knocked his shoulder. “Relax a little, would you?

He signed and scratched at the back of his neck anxiously. “I’m relaxed, I promise! You’re just an interesting girl y’know?”

“Oh, me? Interesting? Oh you’ve got me all wrong, Karl. I’m just plain ol’ me.” Her tone was playful and convincing but the look in her eye didn’t match it. For the first time, he thought she looked wary. He made a note to ease off a little. He didn’t want to push any boundaries too far on the second date. His mind skipped. Did this count as a second date, or was this technically still the first?
The song playing over the sound system, an unfamiliar indie track he couldn’t quite place, ended and quickly faded into another. His ears perked up in recognition at the opening drum beats. “Oh hey, I love this song.”

“I didn’t take you for a fan of The Cardigans.”

“You know them?”

“I saw them live in Stockholm a few years ago, ‘03.” She grinned as she sipped at her beer.

“No way!” An uncontainable smile broke out on his face. “October 2003? At

Cirkus?"

"How'd you know?"

"I was there!"

He thought back to the night. He had still been a relatively fresh university graduate at the time, on a month-long Scandinavian trip with a few friends from home. None of them had wanted to go with him that night. They were all metalheads and he loved his alt-rock. So, for the first time in his life, he went to a concert alone. He'd had the time of his life, swaying to the music and enjoying copious amounts of cheap local beer. The memory gave him a rare flicker of pure joy.

"Funny how fate works isn't it? We were ships passing in the night then, and now here we are." It took every shred of his nerve to not recoil as she reached up to stroke his cheek. "You look like you're in a much better mood than yesterday."

He leaned into her touch. "You're giving me a few reasons to be in a good mood."

She drew her hand away and gave a half-smile. "I'm sure I can give you a few more by the end of the night."

He cleared his throat and blinked hard. It was difficult for him to believe he was awake and that and of this was real. "So, a nurse huh?"

The malamute gave a nod as she took another drink. "Mhmm. I specialised in palliative care. Worked all over the world too. Stockholm, Seoul, Sardinia, São Paulo, St. Petersburg."

Karl could feel his jaw becoming agape. He was stunned to think they were roughly the same age yet she was almost twice as travelled as he. "Why'd you give it up?"

She gave another simple shrug. "I wanted a change of pace. A friend of a friend got me the position for the subway gig so I took it."

He struggled to fathom the abrupt shift in career paths she had made. However he felt it was too rude to voice and kept it to himself. “Well, as long as you’re happy that’s what matters.”
“What’d you want to be? Growing up, I mean.”

The question caught him off-guard. He hummed in thought. “I-uh. A lot of things, I guess.”

“Go on.”

He took a long drink.

“I wanted to be an actor when I was really, really young. My mom loved Broadway musicals and she’d seen every stage play you could think of. She used to volunteer at this theatre company in Staten Island and she’d always drag me along. I guess it rubbed off on me.”

“You never went to theatre school or anything?”

“My Mom couldn’t afford it, even when she was working two jobs. And Dad was still pretending I didn’t exist at that point. I was in a couple of small productions though.”

The malamute leaned in, her eyes afire with intrigue. “No shit? Really?”

He rolled his eyes. “Romeo and Juliet. Then a year later, The Merchant of Venice.”

“Who’d you play in Romeo and Juliet?”

“Guess.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Mercutio.”

“Okay, how did you manage to get that?”

‘’Lucky guess.” She took a triumphant swig from her bottle. “So, how about after acting huh?”

He tapped his foot against the bar to try and jog the memories along. "After that? I wanted to go into medicine for a brief period."

"Hell of a career change."

The coyote gave a nod of agreement. "Well, my dad was back in the picture by this point and I was spending a lot of time in Geneva. He thought it'd be best if I had some independence so he put me up in this apartment he owned in the city centre. It was next to one of the hospitals. So I guess it just sorta came from there. Used to stare outta the windows at night, imagine myself as a surgeon with a cushy little apartment. Dad wouldn't pay for medical school though. It was accounts or nothing."

He noticed a concerned expression on her face which made him wonder what he'd said wrong. "How old were you? When he had you living on your own and everything"

"15? Maybe 16?"

"Fuck me." She rubbed her face in her hands. "Your dad sounds like a piece of shit."

"A piece of shit with money and a piece of shit that got me a job at his company. I'm tied to him whether I like it or not. I suppose I should be grateful."

"Never be grateful to those who have done you wrong." Her tone was sharp as she lectured him. "You don't owe him anything."

He found himself speechless. No one had ever given him any sympathy about it before apart from Stef. The only word that came to mind was short and simple, spoken not too high above a whisper. "Thanks."

She clapped him on the back before leaning over the bar. "Can we get two more here, please?"

A second drink went by and then a third, followed shortly by a fourth. By drink number six, the conversation was a blur. His head struggled to recall anything

past the last few sentences that left his mouth. She seemed to be handling it significantly better than him. She swayed slightly in her chair and had a slight smile on her face at all times. He on the other hand felt like he was firmly at a crossroads between falling asleep or throwing up.

She bounced the conversation back to him, reverting back to their earlier topic. "Why do you do it to yourself, Karl? You could quit any day."

He put his head in his hands. "It's not that easy! Really, if it was, I'd have quit years ago. I've got bills to pay."

"There's plenty of other firms in the city. There's plenty of firms all over the world. Why stay here?"

The question stumped him. He had less obstacles than most as a dual citizen, so why did he stay? The drunken miasma in his head struggled to conjure any valid reason. Instead, he just made a soft whimper. "It's easier, I guess."

She sighed. "You've gotta make a change sometime. I did. And look at me now."

"Where are you even from, anyways? Originally."

Her answer was non-commital. "Somewhere Nordic. I never really narrowed down to one, I moved around a lot when I was younger."

"Oh yeah? Did you have parents like mine?"

"What, an accountant and a maid?" She gave a short snicker.

"An au-pair. And you know that's not what I mean." Even in his inebriated state, he didn't recall ever telling her about his mother's profession before.

"Alright, my parents were separated. Once I was old enough to go it solo, I did. I don't keep in touch."

"You're really brave." The coyote muttered to himself as he propped himself up with one arm on the bar top. He couldn't feel most of his face.

“Thank you, I know.” She smiled at him and clapped him on the shoulder. “Slow down on the drinks would you?”

Karl frowned, he felt guilty for overdoing it. He huffed and blinked hard, raising a single finger at a passing bartender. “Can we get two baskets of fries?”

Approximately two handfuls of piping hot french fries later and he’d managed to cut a gap through the mental fog. His thoughts were clearer and speaking was easier. The music had changed tempo as the clock struck 12:00. The familiar sounds of Jamiroquai’s “Seven Days in Sunny June” filled the air. Lucretia tapped her foot along to the beat.

“We should go to a gig together sometime.” She carefully wound her fingers around his free hand.

He squeezed her hand and said nothing. She’d robbed him of his words. He closed the distance between them and kissed her on the cheek. She responded almost immediately by putting an arm over his shoulder, pulling him into a half hug, and kissed him back. The bartender cleared his throat and they pulled apart shyly. Karl rubbed at the back of his neck as his already rosy cheeks burned crimson.

The lynx behind the bar began spraying a rag with disinfectant and wiped at the space next to them. “Just making you aware, it’s last orders. We close in a half hour.”

He felt Lucretia nudge his arm. “Wanna get out of here?” Before he could even respond, she’d pulled a handful of crisp 20 dollar notes out of her coat pocket. “This covers it all, right?” The bartender’s head perked up.

“Yeah, lemme get your-“

“Keep it.”

“Lady, this is like a 25 dollar tip.”

“I know.” She finished the last of her beer and rose from her seat, tugging at Karl’s sleeve to signal for him to follow suit. “Have a good night.”

They broke out into the chill night air with a joyful wave goodbye from the bartender. The sky was pitch dark but the city was bursting with light. She put her arm around his as they walked side by side.

"You didn't need to cover the whole thing! I could've at least paid half."

She yawned and covered her mouth. "You're good, Karl. Consider it a treat for letting me stay over."

"About that." He paused to work up the remainder of the courage needed. "Would you like to stay again tonight, or?"

Lucretia gave a low whistle. "Your place is two blocks away. Mine is thirty. Does that give you an answer?" He felt her squeeze his arm.

They walked in silence for the length of the block and made a left turn towards Karl's apartment. A sharp worry broke through his dulled mind. Curiosity got the better of him.
"You said you usually keep it to one night things. Is this a one night thing or?"

An elbow playfully bumped his side. "Two night thing." He was in no mood to be playful.
"What about three nights?"

"You're pushing your luck."

"Is it a problem with me or?" He tried to hide the hurt tone in his voice. He choked on his words. The alcohol was making him feel weepy.

They stopped at the front steps to his apartment complex, beneath an oak tree shooting out of the pavement. She turned to face him. "It's not you, really. I just can't commit myself to anything or anyone. I- uhm. Look, there's a reason. It's a pretty good reason. But I just don't think you'd understand."

In the moment, he understood plenty. He understood that this, much like everything else, was yet another dead end. He scolded himself. He should've known better.
"I understand."

She gave a small huff and unwrapped her arm from around his. He moved to give her some space, but she was on him in an instant. Lucretia wrapped her arms tightly around him and pressed her face into his neck, leaving him stunned. They rocked with the wind in one another's embrace. He felt her shiver.

Karl spoke quietly into her ear. "Do you wanna go upstairs?"

Her head nodded and they broke apart. She led him through the doorway. His heart felt heavy and his mind reeled as she pulled him along. Still, he did his best to hold his nerve. He swallowed his emotions. For once in his life, he'd live for the day. He'd appreciate the company and the warmth while it was there and not once it was gone. She squeezed his hand and pulled him close as they entered the apartment. The world fell away into a blur of twisted shapes. He let himself succumb to it and to her.

He'd do his best to enjoy the night, no matter how much it hurt.

*****

"So, when do I get to meet her?" The rabbit jabbed the pointed end of a green bean towards him over the table. The work canteen was unusually busy for a Friday afternoon. Typically, most of the office would either take half-days or start their evening drinking at a nearby bistro. Today seemed to be an exception to the rule as suits shuffled around to find free tables. Mercifully, Stef and Karl had gotten a two-seater up against the wall.

He chased around a french fry on his plate with a fork. "I'm not sure, Stef."

She deposited the bean into her left cheek and chewed with one side of her mouth. "What? You're not going to bring her to your dad's birthday thing?"

"We haven't spoken about it." In truth, they hadn't spoken at all. He'd last seen her a week and a day ago at the bar. After getting home they'd slept together again. And just as before, he awoke to find her missing. She'd drawn a heart crudely on the grocery notepad he kept on his kitchen island. It was now pinned proudly to his fridge with a magnet in the shape of Bern as a reminder of a fleeting memory.

The rabbit scoffed. “Oh come on, you have to! Your old man might give you a raise if you’re lined up to pump out an heir to the financial throne.” She made a vulgar gesture with her fingers and the end of the fork.

Karl cringed and shied away from her with a roll of his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, I’m sure that’s what’ll happen. If all else fails I’ll drag you along and then maybe we’ll both get promoted.”
She leaned back in her chair and pushed her plate away from her. “Too slow, hot shot. I already have a date for it.”

“Who’d you ask?”

“Terrence.”

His brow furrowed. “Wong or Yung?”

“Yung. Christ, I have standards.”

He nodded along. Both Terrence’s were senior credit controllers within the firm. Yung, a red panda, seemed to be far more popular than his equal. “Just checking.”

“Oh, hey, what’s the dress code?”

“Dress co- Stef, it’s a birthday party for an elderly businessman.”

“Okay so I’ll turn up in a crop top and jeans?”

He grumbled aloud. “It’ll be formal wear.”

“Black tie or business casual?”

“Business casual.”

“Good boy!” She patronisingly reached over to fluff his hair. He dodged away just in time. “Have you got it all planned out otherwise?”

"Sort of."

Despite doing his best to shove things to the back burner, that hadn't proved possible. He'd ordered six boxes of pastries from a French bakery nearby along with a few cases of wine. He'd also conscripted a few of the facilities staff to take delivery and set things up on his behalf. Staffing alone had set him back $1,000. He didn't want to imagine the cost of the rest of it combined.

"How's your speechwriting going?"

He tilted his head and batted his eyelashes at her, a polite smile on his face. "I was hoping you'd help with that."

She groaned. "$10."

He counter-offered. "$6."

"$7.50"

"$7."

"Deal."

Sliding his now empty plate over next to hers, he fished around in his bag for a notebook and pen. Stef checked her watch. "You know we've only got fifteen minutes till the end of lunch, don't you?"

"Hey, if anyone asks, you're investing into the firm here by helping with this."

She folded her arms over herself triumphantly. "Sounds like a good excuse to me."

The dining hall got steadily quieter as the two sat hunched over the notepad planning. Karl, with his superior handwriting, dictated her every word. In his mind he could already picture himself at a lectern, in front of everyone important enough to attend.

"*I'd like to take the opportunity to give thanks to all of you for attending…*"

He'd raise a glass of wine and get them all to do the same.

"I'd like to raise a toast, to my beloved father, on his 65th birthday."

His chest started to feel tighter as she spoke.

"To a man who has always been kind, always been generous, and has helped shepherd a range of innovations in his field."

An image of the weathered, emotionless face he was oh so familiar with floated into his head. Even a party in his honour wasn't enough to make him smile.

"Every single one of us owes thanks for our continued success to him. Happy birthda- are you crying?"

White fur flashed in front of his eyes and brought him back to the present. He wiped at his cheeks instinctively and the back of his hand came away sodden with tears. When the coyote tried to speak, he found himself breathless. A small whimper escaped his throat as he clawed at the top button of his shirt, trying in vain to cool himself down. The rabbit rose from her seat and gripped his shoulder.

"Hey! What's the matter with you?!"

A meagre mewl was all that he could muster. His hand found purchase on an untouched glass of ice cold water. Whether it was hers or his, he cared not as he half-drink and half-spilled it down himself. Once the glass was empty he was able to find his voice.

"I'm ok. I'm ok. I'm fine. I'm ok." Despite his pleadings, he could tell that the rabbit wasn't convinced as her hand lingered near him. She helped him up and he leaned against the table to steady himself. He watched his legs quiver beneath him.

"Do you need me to call an ambulance?"

Karl shook his head dismissively. "No, no, no. I'm ok, I promise Stef. I promise."

He grabbed the notebook from the table and tossed it into his bag. “Thank you for this, I owe you.”
“Yeah, I know you do, you owe me seven bucks. What the fuck is wrong with you? Are you gonna be able to make it back to your desk?

He began an uneasy saunter away from her and called over his shoulder. “I just gotta go to the bathroom! I’ll talk to you later!”

As soon as he got out of the dining hall and out of her sight, he ran. His heart slammed against his rib-cage. He sprinted through the halls and past perplexed co-workers as they carried their freshly printed documents. With a raised arm he barrelled through the door to the first private bathroom he found and locked the door behind him. He puked all over the floor before he even raised the toilet seat.

The coyote spent the next half-hour mopping his puke off of the tiles with paper towels and cleaning himself up at the sink. Despite his best efforts the otherwise immaculate bathroom was still tainted by the smell of bile. He held his face in his hands and glared at himself in the soap spattered mirror above the sink. His green eyes were puffy and his face had taken on a ghastly pale shade. A scowl permeated through the stains. There was no way he could sit at his desk for the rest of the day. He needed to go home and be at peace. The image of his fathers unimpressed face haunted him as he wiped off his hands on his pant leg.
As he stepped out into the hall, he closed the door behind himself tightly. Much to his surprise, and relief, the hallway was completely deserted. Only a few metres away, the bank of four elevators stood open and unoccupied. He looked around to make sure the coast was clear before bolting into the first one that he could reach. He slammed the button for the 12th floor and leaned back against the railing with a sigh of relief. Just as the doors came near to fully closed, a dress shoe jutted through the gap. To the coyote’s horror, the doors sprang back open. A familiar felid figure passed through and stared back at him in surprise. “Ah! Karl. I’ve been looking for you.” The leopard lowered his voice to a sharp whisper as he looked around warily. “We need to talk. Urgently.”

Dominic’s office was on the 13th floor, just above the wider team’s workspace. The floor held little apart from a small handful of managerial offices and conference rooms. It was deathly quiet apart from their footsteps reverberating off of the wooden floor. Karl followed him closely, his heart still racing. They ducked into

the second office on the right. The leopard locked it shut behind him.

"Can I get you a drink? Scotch?"

Karl wondered what the occasion was. He looked around the office, which somehow seemed smaller than he remembered. There were no new awards nor plaques from what he could see despite their supposed great successes as a team. "I'll have a dram, thank you."

Dominic poured two glasses worth and slid one across his desk towards him. He gestured for the coyote to sit as well. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Be my guest. It's your office."

The leopard pulled a pack of American Spirit Blue's from his inner suit pocket. He lit one and greedily sucked at the end. "Have you spoken to your father lately?"

A cold sweat formed on his back. "Uh- I can't say that I have no."

"Good. Good." Dominic looked around shifty as if listening out for someone. He lowered his voice back to a whisper. "We are screwed."

Karl followed suit with his own low tone. "Why? What's wrong?"

"We're way, way, way off target. I'm talking tens of millions down. You remember the Schalke deal we struck last July?"

The coyote nodded, the name having brought back vague connotations of a German engineering firm whom he'd helped to translate contracts for. "I do, I do."

Dominic tugged frantically at a loose strand of hair. "They went bust last month and haven't paid a single invoice since December. I was the one cutting them slack because one of their directors begged me to. And you'll never guess who got arrested for fraud this morning."

Karl sipped at the fifty-year vintage and rolled it around in his mouth. He could already tell where this was going.

The leopard frantically tapped his cigarette into the ashtray on his desk. There was a deep-rooted worry in his eyes. "I need you to help me. Please. Look- look I need this job. I've got a mortgage, I've got kids, I can't lose this. I just need you to put a good word in next week at the social with your father."

He swallowed the scotch and cleared his throat. "What do you need me to say?" "Pleasentries, y'know? I'm an asset to the team. I spear-head deals, just general shit like that. Make me look good and I swear to god I'll give you anything you want if I don't get fired over this."

Karl mulled over the idea. He reckoned that a pay rise or double the vacation hours would be nice. "You can owe me one."

Dominic sighed deeply in relief and wiped at his eye, cigarette still gripped tightly between his fingers. "I'll owe you two. Fuck, thank you Karl." He reached out his hand and Karl shook it in agreement. "How's the planning going?"

"Fantastic, Dom, fantastic. Everything's sorted. We'll be using the conference room at the back of the 12th floor with a view out onto the river." He gave a false smile in an attempt to seal the deal as something spectacular.
The feline smiled back and gripped his hand tighter before letting go. "Perfect. That's really perfect, Karl. Thank you. You're free to go."

He quickly finished his drink and parted ways with a wave. The coyote kept his breath held until the elevator opened back on the 12th floor. He gave a heavy sigh, he had no problem with lying to his father but he didn't know if he had as much influence as Dominic expected him to. If they were truly that far off target, his father would be in a foul mood. The coyote bit the inside of his cheek as he reached his cubicle. He would figure something out.

The nagging feeling from the other day had returned in full force the moment he sat back down in his chair. After taking the briefest of glances at his inbox, he shut the laptop down and stuffed it into his bag. There were at least three urgent emails looming but he didn't care to open them. He knew that whether he answered them now, answered them later, or never even answered them at all would make little difference. He would keep his job no matter what he did. His lack of relief at the fact confused him, wasn't this a good thing? As quickly

as he'd arrived only moments ago, he slipped out of the office without a sound.

For the entire subway ride home the coyote wrestled with a mix of nausea and exhaustion. With every lurch and jolt of the carriage he felt as if he were being lulled to sleep. Nothing was working to keep him awake. He tried tapping his foot and pinching the skin on the back of his hand to no avail. Just as his eyes were about to nip shut for the last time, the train shunted to a halt. Karl wasted no time in pushing through the doors and weaving through the crowd on the platform. They all stood frozen in place, their faces aghast as a couple moved past him to peer over the platform edge. He had no idea what they were looking at and he didn't care to find out. All of his focus was being spent on not throwing up again. As he passed through the turnstile, he couldn't shake the unmistakable feeling of being watched closely.

When he emerged, two police officers were standing at the entrance to the station. They were conversing into their radios and waving people away. A handful of transit employees went rushing down the steps past him. Despite his hopes, she wasn't amongst them. A stinging sensation jabbed his heart. He wished that he could see her again. As much as he tried to deny it, he recognised that he was totally wound around her finger like a piece of twine. The coyote grimaced. Why couldn't he have been this in love with someone who wanted him instead, he wondered.

The door to the apartment complex clunked open as the keycard disengaged the lock. With a flick of his wrist he pulled it towards him and squeezed himself inside. He shut it tightly behind him and gave a cursory glance out into the street. Despite the emptiness, the feeling of being surveilled didn't fade away. The coyote whined in discomfort. His uneven footsteps padded up the stairs as he pressed himself against the bannister to remain steady. A cold sweat ran down his forehead as he found and entered his own apartment. With a loud thud, the backpack containing his laptop fell to the floor next to a potted plant. Karl stumbled over to the L-shaped couch in the living area and collapsed onto it. At last he could rest. Lucidity faded away and he let his eyes close without resistance.

Dull, insistent pounding roused him from a deep sleep. For but a brief moment he lapsed back into unconsciousness thinking it was but a dream. The sensation of an unbearably dry mouth and a sickly sweat soon dispelled that illusion. He

swung his legs over the edge of the couch and sat up. A brief glance at his watch told him it was just before 10pm. His brow furrowed, why would anyone be bothering him at this hour? Slowly but steadily, he made his way over to the door. He allowed it to open by only a fraction of an inch.

"Who is it?"

"Room service. Who do you think?"

He swung the door open fully. Lucretia stood in the hallway, captured in portrait by the doorframe. A grey hoodie was slung over her shoulders, complementing a dark coloured pair of ripped jeans. It was the most casual he'd seen her dressed since they'd first met. Dozens of questions burst forth from the back of his mind but only one made it out of his mouth.
"How did you get in here?"

She stuffed her hands into her pockets and looked around shiftily. "I might've tailgated one of your neighbours."

Karl followed suit, peeking his head out into the hall to check for prying eyes. After being satisfied no one was around he turned back to her. "Alright then why are you here?"
The malamute sighed and pulled her hoodie tighter around her. "I'd like to talk. Can I come in?"

Without hesitation he stepped back to give her room to enter. "Make yourself at home." Lucretia smiled softly and brushed past him, depositing herself down on the couch that he'd made his bed on just moments before. "Do you want anything to drink?"

"Just come and sit with me, Karl, please?"

The coyote walked over to her tentatively before resigning himself to his fate and sitting by her side. He made sure to put a slight distance between them. "I thought you said last time that this was a two night thing and that was it?"

"And didn't you say that you wanted it to be three?" She paused for a moment as if to gauge his reaction but the slight frown on his face didn't budge. Her

hand came to rest atop his. “I miss you. That’s why I’m here.”

Karl shook his head silently. “Look, I don’t feel right being strung along. If you don’t want anything serious that’s fine but don’t tell me we’re not seeing each other again and then turn up at my door.”

“I’m not trying to string you along, I promise! It’s just the current circumstances, I can’t commit.”

He stared at her from the corner of his eye. “Please don’t tell me you’re married.” The malamute gave a laugh. “I wish it was as simple as that.”

“Then what *is* it?”

“Believe me, you’d never believe me.” She scratched at her cheek and pushed her hair back behind her ear. “All I can tell you is that I haven’t been entirely honest with you.”

Karl squinted at her in the dim light and huffed. “Oh, try me. Who are you *really?*”

She smiled and laced her fingers around his. Despite being sat in front of him, her voice seemed to come from the back of his head. “I am *Hel*.”

Bleary-eyed, he blinked hard to clear his head. He gave a tired, half smirk. “Alright. That’s definitely an odd name but so is Lucretia. What’s the issue?”

The dog seemed thrown off by his reaction and paused before rolling her eyes at him. “I’ve been trying to distance myself from it. Just stick with Lucretia, please. Or Lucy if you *really* want.”

“You don’t really give off *Lucy* airs to me.” He trailed off in thought for a brief moment.
“What else isn’t true?”

Without a word she laid her head on his shoulder and gripped his hand tighter. “It’s mostly a lot of half-truths I’ve been telling.”

“So you actually do work for the transit authority?”

“In some capacity, yes.”

“And what about the Cardigans concert?”

She gave him a look of slight bewilderment. “That was just a regular truth.”

“And how about on the bridge, when we first met.”

With a heavy sigh she rubbed at her face. “I only followed you up there because I saw you climbing up.”

The coyote hummed quietly in thought, taking it all in. His head still felt dull from the nap and the bout of illness, it made things quite difficult to process. For the briefest of moments he had doubts that any of this was even real. He leaned back against the couch cushion and shut his eyes. “God damnit.”

She let go of his hand and pulled back. “Look. I completely understand if this is where you’d like things to end. I’m sorry.”

“You misled me. You’ve lied to me. And you’re probably still not being truthful about everything.” He reached out and gently tugged at her wrist. Against his better judgement, he’d made his choice. To hell with what was best for him, he thought. “But I’d like you to stay.”

The malamute froze before lunging forward, wrapping him in her embrace. She held him forcefully and nuzzled her face into his neck. He’d never felt as much love in another’s touch in his entire life. Even if it felt somewhat tainted by countless little lies.
“On one condition.”

The malamute spoke into the soft spot underneath his chin. “I’m all ears.”

*****

“You drop a single one of those pastries and I’ll fucking kill you.” The raccoon

nodded fearfully at the rabbit's command. Karl glanced over at the sound as he removed his coat and slung it over a chair in the corner.

"You're alright, Kevin, she won't bite. Her teeth are too dull for that." The bespectacled raccoon nodded and hurried away holding a tray of canelés. "I don't recall paying you to co-ordinate, Stef."

"Hey! You haven't paid me at all. You still owe me seven bucks for the speech." The coyote reached into the pocket of his suit pants and pulled out his wallet. "How's five and a full coffee stamp card for the deli?"

"Gimme that." She snatched the wallet out of his hand and rifled through it to claim her reward.

He looked around to admire her and the facilities staff's handiwork. The boardroom blinds had been pulled up to give a full view of the Hudson River. At one end of the room a lectern had been set up, flanked by the Stars and Stripes and a Swiss flag. An easel with various charts and graphs of massive profits sat in a neat row to the lectern's left. At the other side of the room, a large spread of cakes, cheeses, wines and cold meats had been laid out across a long table. A few of the co-workers he'd paid stood around in waistcoats, readying themselves to act as servers for the evening. "Thank you, Stef, you really didn't need to help out like this."

The rabbit feigned wiping sweat from her brow. "Well I just wanted to make sure it all went swimmingly, I'm a Good Samaritan like that. No thanks needed." She handed him his now empty wallet back.

He checked his watch. It was a quarter to nine, thirty minutes before the reception was due to begin. Karl pulled at his tie nervously. "Do we have everything?"

Stef pulled a small piece of note paper out of her shirt pocket. "Everything that's on the invoice. Two cases of Bordeaux, two cases of Chardonnay, two cases of Beaujolais. All the food arrived fine too. We're all set." She looked at the coyote and frowned before plucking a bottle of wine from the closest case. Its screw-top opened with a crack before she poured a large glass and handed it to him. "Here, for your nerves."

He watched as she poured another glass for herself. “Should we really be drinking before anyone else gets here?”

“Yup.” There was a soft clink as she tapped her wine glass against his. “Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

For the next half hour they worked their way through the bottle along with half of a large charcuterie board. Slowly but surely the room filled up with firm partners, managers and co-workers. Terrence Yung, Stef’s date, had arrived just after nine. The red panda looked somewhat exasperated as he approached. He greeted the rabbit with a polite kiss and the coyote with a firm handshake. “I was worried that I wasn’t going to make it in time. They’ve shut off the street.”

“What happened?” The coyote found himself putting in more effort than he would’ve liked in order to not slur his words. He set his glass down on the table.

“Someone jumped off one of the high-rises next to the deli.”

Stef gasped and made the sign of the cross over herself. “Oh god that’s awful.”

Karl blinked and muttered under his breath. “Terrible.” He reached behind himself to grab a second bottle of wine. “Would you like a drink, Terrence?”

The red panda, looking slightly jarred, nodded. For the next ten minutes the three of them drank and made small talk. Karl found himself checking his watch more and more frequently as they reached the start time. A finger tapped his forearm.

“Is she coming?” Stef spoke quietly close to his ear. Terrence raised an eyebrow.

“We’ll see.”

Across the room, the sound of clapping and a couple shouts of “Happy Birthday” drew their attention. Karl’s grip on his glass tightened so much so he feared that the stem might snap.
It was like looking into a mirror. A weathered, tired and far older mirror. His father’s hair was greying and his face a lot more aged compared to his own. However his eyes still had life in them, something that Karl worried that his

own didn't. The old man looked to be in a good mood, shaking hands and patting backs. He strode over to his father as he began to speak to Dominic, remembering his duty. "Happy birthday, Dad."

The old man turned to him with a smile. Much to his son's surprise, he pulled him into a tight hug. Karl had no choice but to return the embrace. "It's so good to see you." Over his shoulder he could see his father's personal assistant lingering by the door. She was a saluki, who looked to be about his age, who averted her eyes when they met with his own. They broke apart and his dad clapped him on the shoulder. "How have you been?"

Karl gave a polite smile. "I'm good, Dad, I'm really good." He gestured towards his manager. "Dominic and I have been doing some great work over these last few months." From the corner of his vision he could see the leopard smiling nervously.

His father waved his hand dismissively. "Ach, outside of work! Have you brought a girl with you this time?"

The younger coyote gave a pained smile. "She's running a little late, but she'll be here."
"Ah! I can't wait to meet her then." He leaned forward and spoke in a hushed tone. "And is your mother well?"

A flare up of rage threatened to twist his words but he managed to keep calm.

"She's fine. The staff at the hospice think she's really sweet, so she's in good hands." A drop of venom dripped into his words. His father seemed to flinch but managed to keep a happy look on his face.
"Hey I'm gonna get something to drink, would you like anything Mr Lagermann?"

Both coyotes turned towards the leopard in unison and spoke one after the other.

"I'm fine." The younger one dismissed him.

"Oh, I'll take whatever's red."

The leopard nodded diligently and stepped away, leaving the father and son

alone. His father gestured towards the girl lingering by the door who stepped forward to fill the gap. “Karl, this is Freya.”

They made pleasantries and shook hands. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise, Mr Lagermann, your father always speaks very highly of you.”

“He does?” The younger coyote chuckled. “There’s a surprise.”

His father gave a strained laugh. Twisting on her heel, the bespectacled assistant turned to him. “Sir, I’ve moved your 10pm meeting to 5pm tomorrow. You should have a clear schedule for the evening.” Underneath the tone of her words was something that Karl couldn’t quite place. It was an air of clear suggestion that made him deeply uncomfortable.

Every suspicion was confirmed when his father put his arm around her shoulder. “Thank you, Freya, I have no idea what I’d do without you.”

Karl dug his claws into his palms in a mixture of disbelief and disgust. He quickly finished his drink and excused himself to get another. The coyote bee lined towards Stef and Terrence who were still mingling at the table’s edge. It was Stef who caught his eye. “What’s up?”

“I think my dad’s sleeping with his PA.”

The rabbit’s eyes grew wide. Terrence stared at him in horror. “What? Isn’t she your age? She looks like she is.” He spoke with his mouth full of cheese and ham.

Collectively they all turned to look at the couple who were still blissfully unaware of the observation. Karl couldn’t help but notice the genuine happiness on his father’s face as he spoke to her. “Oh they are so hooking up.” Stef mumbled quietly. His stomach turned.

“Hey, make sure not to point out the obvious in your speech.” The quip earned the red panda a hard glare from the coyote. His expression softened upon realisation. He’d almost forgotten about the speech entirely. Reaching into his top pocket, he pulled out the same piece of crumbled note paper that Stef had dictated to him days ago. He hadn’t practiced much but at this point he felt it

was too late to bother with any rehearsal. His eyes darted to the rabbit for some form of reassurance. She offered a small thumbs up in response.

With his stomach now twisting itself into a tight knot, he walked behind the lectern and laid his notepaper onto it. It seemed to him as if most if not all guests had arrived, it was time to get it out of the way. Stef picked up a metal fork which had gone unused on the charcuterie table and drummed it against her wine glass to rouse everyone's attention. The whole room turned to look towards him. He cleared his throat.
"I'd like to thank you all for coming tonight. I do hope you've all enjoyed each other's company so far." His hands tensed up around the edges of the lectern. It took every ounce of effort for him to not start bouncing his leg.

"We're here to celebrate a man who has always been kind. Who has always been generous. Who has always shepherded innovation. He's someone whom we all owe an immense gratitude to." The lies tasted bitter as they rolled off of his tongue. In the crowd his father stood, bashful and blushing, accepting the praise and applause. Freya eyed him curiously as if he had suddenly turned transparent. He wondered if she was able to tell he was being facetious.

A horrible thought drifted into his mind at the worst time. How long would he have to keep up this charade? Would it be another five years or another twenty-five? He pictured himself older, still spouting honeyed words about the wretch of a man standing before him. He swallowed down a whimper before it dared to rise out of his throat. "I, especially, would like to thank my father for all I have."

Just as he was about to wrap things up, the door to the boardroom jutted open. A few heads turned as the tall, slender canid made her way into the room as quietly as she could manage. Karl's words caught in his throat, he had never seen her in a dress before. The long, flowing garment was an inky black, complimented by a pale crystalline necklace and earrings. She locked eyes with him and waved. He couldn't help but smile. "Now, would you all please join me in raising a toast to him on his 65th birthday."

Stef handed him a full glass from off to his right. He took it gladly and lifted it into the air, a dozen others followed suit. A shower of applause filled the room as the elder coyote gave a small bow. "Happy birthday, Dad." Karl swallowed down half of his glass in one gulp and stepped out from behind the podium. A

gaggle of eager suits swarmed his father with conversation and congratulations. He made no attempt to break his way into the circle.
Lucretia peeled herself off of the wall by the door and came up to his side. "Sorry I'm late. I had to do a little unexpected overtime tonight."

"I'm just glad you made it." He leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. "You look stunning."

"I haven't worn a dress in many, many moons. Consider yourself lucky." She flicked her finger at his collarbone. As she looked over his shoulder, she gave a small wave. When Karl turned to look, he was surprised to see it was aimed at Freya. The assistant glared at the both of them in a mixture of surprise and what looked to be outright horror. He quickly averted his eyes but could still feel her gaze boring into the back of his skull.

"What's her problem?"

"She and I know each other. Old acquaintances." Lucretia put her arm around his shoulder and herded him away from the crowd.

"Really? Would you like to speak with her?"

"Absolutely not."

She strode over to the steadily emptying table of food and wine with him in tow. Both Terrence and Stef stood at the mid section looking towards the couple expectantly. Karl joined the two of them as Lucretia poured herself a glass. "How do you think the speech went?"

"I think you did great thanks to *my* speech. Now, who's the girl?" Stef sized him up with an air of suspicion.

The coyote squinted. "The same girl I've been talking about for weeks?"
"That's her?!" The rabbit blinked hard and looked between Karl and Lucretia. "I knew you had a thing for goths!"

Terrence laughed hard as the coyote scowled. "Oh grow up." He glanced over his shoulder and welcomed the malamute into the little group they'd formed in

the corner as she approached. “This is my friend Stef, and this is Terrence.” He pointed at each of them in turn. Lucretia shook both of their hands politely. “Terrence, Stef, this is Lucretia.”

“It’s nice to meet you both.” She gave a small curtsy toward them.
Stef leaned back and swirled her glass of wine between her fingers. “And it’s nice to finally put a name to a face. Especially with how much he talks about you.”

The coyote rolled his eyes as the two began to make small talk. He took another swig from his glass and felt a wave of inescapable dizziness. It started to dawn on him that he might have drunk a bit too much far, far too quickly. The seconds stretched to minutes and minutes fell into an hour as Karl felt himself half-consciously revolving around the room, showing face and socialising in the most ingratiating manner he could muster. He spent time speaking with his Japanese colleagues, praising their productivity that quarter and discussing the recent resignation of their Prime Minister. Afterwards, it came to dealing with the two Belgian partners in attendance. Much to his surprise he managed to find common ground talking about how that year’s Tomorrowland festival had gone. Lastly he dealt with the Polish delegates, where he commiserated about their premature knockout from the World Cup. All three of the groups weaved together into a drunken blur, to the point where he wasn’t one-hundred percent sure he’d said the right things to the right people. However, the fact that no one had slapped him across the face yet assured him that he was correct. At last he fell back into a state of lucidity whilst ramming a fresh chocolate eclair into his mouth. Rather impressively, the table had been cleared almost in its entirety. Luckily there was still enough left for him to follow-up the eclair with a handful of thinly-sliced Brie and crackers.

“Having fun?” His eyes darted to his left as he felt Lucretia’s arm wrap around his waist. It took him a moment to choke down his mouthful of food and respond.

“Yeah, yeah, I think I’ve left a good enough impression. I hope.”

“You looked like you were keeping people entertained, good work.” She squeezed him a touch tighter and planted a kiss on his cheek.

Still feeling unsteady, he rested his head against his shoulder. “Thanks. I appreciate the positive feedback.”

"I can give you a full performance review later if that's what you'd prefer." They both shared tipsy giggles at the suggestion. "You wanna get outta here?"

With a silent nod and a farewell wave to Stef and Terrence, who now seemed far more preoccupied with each other than what was normally acceptable in a public space, Karl clung to Lucretia's side as they made their way towards the door. In hindsight, things had gone far better than he ever could have imagined. For the most part, his father looked to have genuinely enjoyed the evening. The speech had gone well and even after a couple of hours the room was still abuzz with excitement and socialisation. He peeked at his watch just as the digit flicked forward. It was now a quarter to eleven and he felt utterly exhausted.

Just as they were about to cross the threshold, on the very cusp of slipping away unnoticed, they found their path blocked. Karl, once again, found himself looking at his aged reflection.

"Karl, I really have to thank you for tonight. What an excellent event this has been!." The elder coyote took note of his partner. "And you must be my son's girlfriend, I presume?"

"You'd be right in your presumption, Mr Lagermann." The confirmation of it alone made him feel warm.

"Well! I'm so glad my boy's finally picked himself an outstanding woman. I must say your dress is *beautiful*. Wouldn't you agree, Freya?"

The saluki, looming behind his father, spoke through gritted teeth. "Yes, it really is."

"I'll tell you what, I'm still in town for the next few days. Freya, would you mind clearing my Monday morning and scheduling lunch with Karl here and- ah! How rude of me, I never caught your name Ms?"

He watched her eyes move between his father and his father's assistant. They rested intently on Freya as she spoke. "Lucretia."

Karl watched as the saluki drew her hand into a fist before relaxing it again. "Of course, sir." She spoke the words aloud with a sneer.

“Excellent! I’ll see you both at Le Bernardin for midday. Ah! Henry!”

Before either of them could move to protest the invitation, the old man had stumbled off to attend to another group of guests who had caught his attention. This left the two of them awkwardly stuck with Freya. Lucretia took a step forward and went to move past her but the saluki moved to block her path. “And just what the hell are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question.” Karl moved to stand at her side with his left shoulder facing toward the door. He slipped her hand into his, eager to make a quick exit. “Unfortunately I really don’t have the time to, my boyfriend and I have to get home.”

“Oh I’m sure you do have time, Lucretia.” The assistant spat out her name as if it tasted rancid in her mouth. She moved to speak again but stopped as she looked past the both of them. With a frustrated sigh, she stopped out of the way. “You’re going to have a lot of explaining to do.” She spoke to neither one of them in particular as she strode past. Not wanting to wait around for a further response, the two of them made their escape down the hall toward the elevator.

“Genuinely, what is up with that girl.” The coyote said as he mashed the button for the ground floor. His partner simply groaned before it evolved into a strained laugh.

“I’ll tell you about it later, I promise. Private, family matter.”

They stood silently as the elevator whirred its way from top to bottom at speed, leaning against one another for support. Karl could feel his eyes beginning to hurt from the fatigue.

He had to blink a few times in order for his vision to clear once they finally reached the ground. At this time of night the marble-floored lobby was completely desolate apart from a sole overnight receptionist and a cleaner working away in the far corner. The couple’s footsteps echoed across the entire room as they stumbled outside.

Despite the pitch dark sky, the world was illuminated by Manhattan’s artificial glow. A biting chill in the air made him shudder as the memory of teetering over

the bridge's edge came back to him in a flood. Rather than letting it overwhelm him, he simply pressed closer to his partner. The coyote smiled to himself, she seemed to be able to help him keep his head above water. Slowly but surely, they sauntered their way through the streets together. They passed by the shuttered deli, still cordoned off with yellow and black police tape. A jagged chalk outline had been scratched into the pavement. Its silhouette had its arms outstretched toward them, silently asking to be lifted back to its feet. Both of them moved on, unable to fulfil its cry to turn back the clock. Somewhere in the far distance, the familiar sound of sirens screamed into the heavens above.

Just as they rounded the corner of the block, a spattering of drizzle came down from the clouds and hurried them along. Hand in hand, they took shelter beneath the shedding branches of the tree in-front of his building. Karl leaned forward and they shared a small kiss in the quiet street.

"I'm glad you could make it tonight."

"I'm glad I could too."

Karl gave a grin. "Even if you're stuck going to lunch with my father and his assistant?"

"His *mistress* by the looks of things."

The coyote made an audible, disgusted groan and turned his head away.

"Oh come on I'm sure we'll manage. As long as they skip the public displays of affection." She rubbed at her tired eyes.

He doubled over and put his hands on his knees. "Please stop, I'm going to throw up."

Lucretia cackled and straightened him back up. "Bet he kisses like a trout."

Unable to hide his smile any longer, he laughed along with her and wrapped his arms around her once more. "That is the *last* thing I want to think about right now." The coyote exhaled and watched the steam of his breath dissipate.

“What would you rather think about?”

In his head, the monotony broke at last like a shattered mirror. For once in his life, Karl allowed himself to think forward. He pictured his routine shifting to accommodate waking up with her in the mornings and laying down by her side at night. He’d commit the sensation of her body intertwined with his own to memory. He’d learn to enjoy life all that little bit more.

“I’ll tell you later.” He pulled out of their embrace and slid his arm around her shoulder.

She did the same in turn as he pressed his keycard against the panel by the door. “You can tell me in the morning, I’ll be right here.”

The lock clicked once then twice as the door opened and shut. For the first time in a long time, every weight and every worry had been lifted off of the centre of the coyote’s chest. He held his head up high as he ascended the stairs. No matter what the world threw at him, whatever curveball or hurdle, he’d make it through. And nothing could take that strength away from him.

Not anymore.

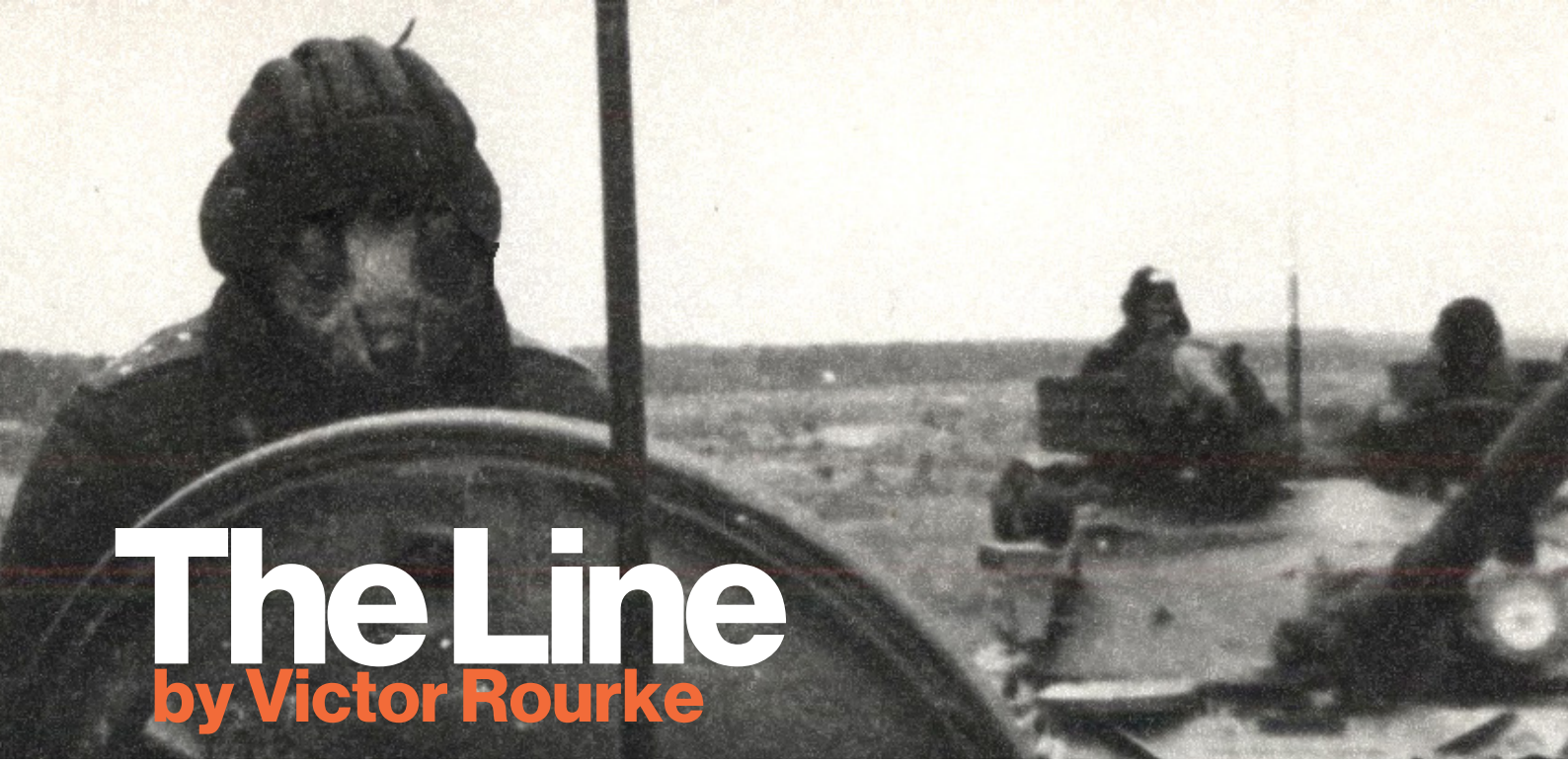
This piece was written as part of the Tall Tails 2025 Short Story Challenge and evolved from a simple idea about two characters sharing an intimate moment whilst at the end of their respective tethers.

It has now grown to being 3,000 words longer in length than my masters thesis, with the largest majority of this work being done in two stints of 31 minutes each day, Monday to Friday, on my commute back and forth from my own office job.

If I were to thank everyone involved in helping me get this story finished, I'd be here for quite some time. I would, however, like to extend my unending gratitude to Stooser for being my tireless editor whenever needed. I appreciate all the help, support and motivation that you've given me throughout writing this. I'd also like to give further thanks to @Savvy_Raccoon for providing the initial visual reference for Karl.

This marks my first complete long form piece. There will be more to come.

Art by Savvy_Raccoon



The Line

by Victor Rourke

It was the second winter of the war.

The Pine Marten, swore it was colder than the last winter. The heater inside the dimly lit tank had broken down, He rubbed his flanks to generate some warmth, feeling his rough and dirty fur rub up against the inside, of his winter tanker overalls. His whiskers felt strung out, and his tail cramped against the shield of the backrest of his seat. The pine marten licked at the layer of plaque on his fangs, his mouth twisted in disgust at the taste. Stinking breath coming out in a fog.

Captain Ratimir Askolonov smelt awful, everyone in the white painted grimy interior of the tank did, the rest of the inside of tank did for that matter. It all smelt of diesel, engine oil, burnt powder, sweat, mud and piss and shit and vomit.

The later three smells where care of their former driver, the poor bastard, a stoat, had been racked with dysentery. He had finally keeled over into a quivering gasping mess when the tank had been in a battle.

That memory was hell. The main gun booming, the open breech filling the space with the chemical reek of spent rounds. The chattering of the coaxial machine gun, and Ratimir screaming at his driver to reverse. If it hadn't been for the other tanks in the platoon, Ratimir's would've been destroyed, by the panicked Lashprenistein gray fox with a rocket launcher. If it hadn't been for the rest of the platoon, Ratimir and crew would then have joined the countless other

burned, and torn bodies the pine marten had seen over the years of this war.

Those bodies that fell apart when they where pulled from burnt and ruined tracks, those bodies that smelt of burned fur and meat, whose charred innards spilled out, and flesh and seared uniforms pulled apart in clawed hands.

All those bodies.

The driver had been sent to the rear, and Ratimir had gotten a new one, thankfully not some fresh replacement, but unfortunately from a tank that had been knocked out in the company. At least Ratimir wouldn't have to train him, but he wished the eyes of the ferret that sat in the drivers seat up front, did not look so dead.

They reminded Ratimir of his own eyes.

They where eyes he saw on everyone now. Dull furred, sunken eye sockets, the eyes darting about nervously, it was the look of tired walking corpses, waiting to finally be laid to rest. Then those eyes would be still, be blank. Or the eyes would burst from over pressure, or ripped to shreds along with their heads, or ooze out of their sockets and mingle with melted fat from flesh, feeding fires like a candle.

A war in its third year will make someone look like that, thought Ratimir *One your own country started as well.*

Ratimir shivered and rubbed his sides some more.

It had started as a war of liberation, retaking lost land and stopping fellow peoples being persecuted. Lashprenistein had a revolution, a fascist monarchy had taken over from the republic. The leaders of Vuskovania had seen it as a quick war. It was also good to take part of Lashprenistien's oil production for Vuskovania, so as to weaken the fascists. It had seemed so very easy.

Then it wasn't.

The peoples they were to liberate had turned to be fiercely nationalistic to Lashprenistein. Lashprenistein's own military and in particular its government's paramilitary formations, had not been as disorganized as thought. Vuskovania's military was itself not as organized as it had been thought.

Ratimir gritted his teeth at the incompetent waste of it all. Now they were stuck in a stalemate, the dogs, the Lashies had even invaded Vuskovania itself! Miles of trenches and bunkers lined up against each other, the land in between nothing but a nightmare scape of craters, blasted trees, and a ruined village here and there. But it was winter now, and the ground had hardened up. Though the big pushes, the big attacks would wait until it was warmer, still in the dead of winter, either side sought to kill the other.

Ratimir sat waiting in his tank, his stomach growling, his eyes heavy, and his ears perked for a call over the radio.

Captain Ratimir Askolonov did not have to wait long.

The headphones in his canvas tanker helmet crackled alive with a panicked voice, in the background faintly Ratimir could hear other shouting voices, and explosions "Shura 1 Shura 1! This is Yuri 3! Lashies are bombarding our sector, heavy artillery mixed with smoke, they are going to try for another attack!"

Ratimir responded through his throat mic that they would make their way to pre-prepared positions and fight from there. He then switched to the battalion net and heard the same story, all along his 2 mile sector, the enemy was hitting it, and hitting it hard with artillery. Though other areas seemed to be quiet.

No aircraft, and so far nothing dropped on the rear areas. Could it be a feint to somewhere else on the line? Just a probe? Could be figured Ratimir, or it could be just another desperate attack, the Lashies were being more picky with their rockets and aircraft, hell with anything from anti tank guided missiles to main battle tanks. the sanctions were hitting them hard. But so were they for Vuskovania. Though what the Lashies did have, was numbers, and hate.

In a year or two Ratimir figured, it would all have to be done with sticks and clubs.

Ratimir switched to the company net and said "All Shura units all Shura units, take up pre-built positions, do not open fire utill the enemy is 300 meters from the trench line. Fire at will at any armor and vehicles. Call out your targets, do not waste rounds on dead tracks.

"Expect for firing orders to be updated. Shura 1 out."

Ratimir then keyed in to his crew and said "Driver start it up, gunner run a

diagnostic check on the laser range finder."

The crew responded yes to their orders. The gunner, a Wolverine named Popov quickly went over the laser range finders computer. The driver, the ferret was named Ustinov, cranked up the engine. The V12 sputtered and choked, then roared into life while spewing out white exhaust smoke as the engine cold started. The interior lights flickered as the engine turned on.

Ratimir popped open the hatch of the commanders cupola, hissing at the cold air that rushed in. He stood up on his seat, gripping with his gloved hands the commanders hatch. It was easier to navigate the tank from outside.

In the distance, forward of the tank, Ratimir saw the clouds of smoke through the trees, and saw and heard the thunder of the Lashie's artillery. His tank tore forward. Frozen dirt and clumps of snow were kicked up by the treads, the engine whined and howled as the tank moved across the dirt road, the tracks screeched and squeaked in rapid succession.

As the tank made its way to its dug out position, Ratimir again felt the sense of detachment coming. He felt removed from himself, yet also felt himself give orders, felt himself respond to messages on the radio, he smelt the exhaust of the diesel engine, the bitter cold of the air and the oncoming acrid smell of the Lashie smoke rounds, and the sharp almond scents from the artillery rounds.

Ratimir knew he was still there, still in control, and yet he could not deny this detached feeling from himself. It had occurred almost with every battle now. The worst part was when he did get this feeling, he didn't think of anything else, it was as if he was just slumped in a corner somewhere, not asleep, but not awake, just numb and desensitized as he watched himself operate his company, operate his tank.

Perhaps it was best to be like this, in this business of war.

When the tank got to its dugout position, which was 50 meters behind the trench, Ratimir buttoned up the hatch. It took a bit to find the embankment in the smoke cloud, but the wind was climbing now, and starting to clear the smoke.

The tank was only 2 and a half meters tall, squat and low the only thing above the embankment was the turret, it was all that was needed. The tanks low stature made it hard to hit, though not impossible.

The artillery rounds had stopped, it wouldn't be long now.

Through the weakening screen of smoke. Ratimir saw through his periscope

other uniformed, and helmeted mustelids scramble and run to their positions in the trenches ahead. It looked like the aim of the Lashies had fallen off somewhat Ratimir concluded, he didn't observe many hits on the trench itself. But he could see stretcher bearers carrying bodies, could see soldiers in torn white smocks that covered ruined olive drab uniforms, stagger as they clutched ragged wounds.

One soldier, an ermine, just stood still, his helmet off, staring up at the dirty gray overcast sky. Ratimir tried to ignore him as he looked out at no mans land.

All the pine marten saw was a moonscape of ripped up ground, wild uprooted lengths of barbed wire, exploded trees, and burned Lashie tracks. There where bodies out there too, all in various stages of decay. One body in particular, rested chest down on some barbed wire, the wire was holding it up. There was still some meat sticking to the canine skull, the gray and black strips of flesh, fur still clinging to it, hanging down like some putrid veil.

Ratimir simply continued his reconnaissance.

The Lashies were getting choosy with their tanks and other vehicles, saving them for the big pushes. More and more it was just infantry attacking, and more often than not, not the regular army, just Lashprenistien's fanatical paramilitaries the Black Hats.

Ratimir hoped it was regular army, at least it wasn't as much of a slaughter with them, it felt like a fight. The Black hats had only their horrible zeal, and vast numbers to make some type of difference.

But, Ratimir knew such distinctions didn't matter really, it was all slaughter in the end. His fading company was very good at killing, though with this rate of attrition, Ratimir gave themselves the end of next month before they were knocked out. They had the best tanks in Vuskovania's army, but they were not invincible.

On paper they had 11 tanks and a wheeled armored personnel carrier, a full company. This winter they were down to 6 and the APC. On paper the battalion of infantry Ratimir's unit was attached to had 500 men. Ratimir knew it was somewhere around half that number.

At least they had plenty of ammunition so far, Ratimir knew they were going to need it. The Lashies knew at some point, the Vusks's guns would go silent as they ran empty.

At least there was another line to retreat to, and another and another and another…

Ratimir called out on the company net for a status report, all was clear other than one tanks turret traverse motor was making an odd sound but they still had movement. Ratimir hoped it would not be serious, who knows how long it would be until they got a replacement of such technical parts, or even new tanks

of the company's type.

Sticks and clubs, sticks and clubs.

Ratimir looked over to the gunner "HE loaded?"

Popov said yes, Ratimir ordered another one ready to be loaded. Popov complied and the automatic loader's ammunition carousel rotated beneath their seats, its mechanical whine joining in with the rumble of the engine. It didn't take long for the next 125mm round to be selected. It only took 6 seconds for a round to be loaded after firing. More than enough time Ratimir knew for their work, but sometimes those seconds felt like eons when in battle.

Next to the main gun they had a 7.62mm coaxial machine gun, and a 12.7mm heavy machine gun mounted to a race ring pintle mount, attached to the commanders cupola. In order to fire the heavy machine gun, Ratimir had to be outside, his top half exposed. Sure the open hatch could act as a shield, but he found he couldn't reach the trigger paddle, or adjust the gun quickly if he had the hatch in front of him. He could easily rotate the copula on its own race ring, and have the gun facing forward free of the hatch, but then he would be exposed. Ratimir thought it such an odd oversight not to be able to control the HMG from inside, but it was one of the few weak points of his tank, the other main one being a low reverse gear, they could only reverse at 4km, compared to the 60km top speed when going forward. The anemic gun depression angle helped none either.

Still the pine marten was glad he was in his tank, a KGT-72E2, an export version with slightly thinner composite armor then the main version from their chief supplier the Olenevior Federation.

Chief supplier until they too joined in the waves of sanctions, now it was just a pittance than what came before, like from all the rest.

Perhaps it was a mistake to use nerve gas on the Lashies, wondered Ratimir with bitter and humourless sarcasm The rest of the world seemed most upset.

Bile rose to the back of his throat when he recalled that first time almost a year ago now. Small utility prop planes that the Vuskovanian airforce had retrofitted where used in the attack, this had been when Ratimir and the grand majority of Vuskovania's army was still in Lashprenestien proper. The nerve gas was deployed over a prepared position of an entire mechanized infantry brigade inside of a town. Some 1200 canines. Some had escaped, most did not.

When Ratimir's unit finally pulled up to the town along with the rest of the regiment he was with then, what he saw through his periscope and gas mask lenses, was the closest thing he figured the underworld would be.

Ratimir saw bodies of uniformed canines, curled up into horrible twists and stiff angles, slumped wide eyed over their guns, staring with empty eyes up from their vehicles. Ears laid flat and back, tails stiff, foamed mouths open in a permanent fanged snarl, tongues flopped out, some had their hands at their throats, as if to claw air into them. None had chemical suits, none had gas masks, their commanders evidently didn't think this war would escalate to this level.

Of course, the dead soldiers were not the worst part.

Some civilians had still been in the town, now they were all dead, subjected to a choking, cramping and spasming death, as their synapses fired uncontrollably, and enzymes were blocked leading to burning suffocation.

Ratimir beforehand did not know that a grey wolf girl pup could die in such a way. Now he knew, and would always know.

The gassing of that town wasn't the last of such an instance, and while it had worked at breaking some stalemates, and had worked at sometimes keeping back Lashie attacks, the canines still fought on, despite the chemical threat that could join the battle at any moment.

At some point Ratimir knew the Lashies would use more than tear gas in some of their battles, but so far nothing.

Ratimir did not feel like he deserved to be relieved by that fact.

Sticks and clubs would be better than that gas.

Smoke still clung to the area across the trenches, the wind was starting to pick up. Ratimir wondered if any of the mines that had been laid out in front of the trench had survived.

Ratimir didn't have long to wonder.

The first Lashie wave came out of the wisps of smoke in disorganized groups. They ran, climbed and sometimes crawled through no man's land, all with as much effort as they could muster. Ratimir guessed that they were about 500 meters out, his company and the men in the trench wouldn't open up until

they were 300 meters away.

As the Lashies got closer, Ratimir started to notice that none of them seemed very tall, their uniforms seemed ill fitting, webbing and field gear was loose, their coal scuttle helmets or field caps to big and he quickly realized why.

They were all children, the Lashies where sending children in the first wave again.

Boys from 12-18 sometimes younger, were making their way to attack the Vuskvonian defenses. It was a tactic used by the Black Hats, it was one Ratimir unfortunately had seen many times before. The child soldiers would be sent forward mostly to soak up rounds, to trigger mines and if any made it through to throw grenades at the trench, to soften it up for the next wave.

Ratimir felt the detached feeling grow stronger, and this time was glad for it.

Ratimir remembered hearing from an officer who had interrogated one of these children, why they were they doing it, why would they so willingly die? The translated answer, from the fox kit with hate in his eyes was "Because you are here."

That was all the officer got. These child soldiers had been given plastic toy daggers, to be used and displayed proudly in the Land Of Glory, a hereafter place for warriors in Lashprenistein's pantheon.

It was fanaticism that Ratimir once thought unheard of, and his countries invasion had unleashed it. These fascist, monarchist raving lunatics were using their own young against the Vusks, all to drive the invaders out and to rid the world of them, to punish them for starting this war. All for the great Endsieg, the final victory. Ratimir flinched when he saw one of the pups, a jackal, trip a land mine, his body disappeared in a smear of red that was at the center of a column of snow and dirt.

Ratimir did not pay attention to what fell back to earth.

Another went up, then another and another. Some survived, and laid on the ground, twisting and crawling as if trying to physically leave the immense pain behind. One, a coyote, tripped a mine, and simply stood there, dazed and looking confused, while the stump of his right arm bled. Sometimes Ratimir wished the optics of his tank were not so good, but still he looked, and felt grateful, as the feeling of detachment strengthened.

Someone in the tank was whimpering, and the pine marten wanted to lash

out at the mewling noisemaker, but when he thought about doing something, he didn't have it in him.

Another went off, and another, one or six ran back and Ratimir knew they would be gunned down by Black Hat political officers. Most of them kept coming on, tripping mines or tripping over the ruined earth, on their comrades. Ratimir called out to his company, and told them to hold fire until the main wave came in, the infantry in the trenches would handle this first wave.

When the children and teenagers crossed the 300 meter mark, the infantry in the trenches opened fire.

What must have been 600 children at the start, was whittled down to half that by the mines. After the wall of automati rifles and machine guns stopped, Ratimir did not see any left alive, or at least none in fighting condition. Only a handful seemed to have been able to throw their grenades, now they were either dead, or bleeding out and screaming for their mothers that would never come.

Ratimir was glad he could not hear them inside his tank.

The battalion net reported only a few wounded. None wasted rounds on those dying in the field. The first wave had done its job however, they had taken care of some of the mines, and had forced the Vusks to waste magazines and belts of ammunition. Had the first wave been bigger, they would have had to use their motors and other artillery, and the tanks would join in too. Sometimes they were bigger, in some waves one would swear Lashprenistein was made up of nothing but children and teenagers, or the old and frail.

This was shaping up to just be another probe in force figured Ratimir.

When the main infantry did arrive, Ratimir honestly was surprised when he saw the tanks coming in out of the fading mist as well.

The main wave was some 700 meters out. Ratimir ordered his company to fire at the infantry, then target the tanks with HEAT rounds. The enemy tanks were, based on their 75mm guns, their boxy and tall profile, old Continental War vintage tanks. There was no point in wasting APFSDS rounds on 50 year old tanks. Consequently Popov rotated the carousel again until a HEAT round was made ready. Ratimir waited for the machine to be done its selection then said "Gunner HE/FRAG, Infantry, gun center, 650 meters!"

Popov replied after adjusting the guns azimuth "Identified!"

"Fire!"

"Shot!"

Almost simultaneously, Popov depressed the main gun trigger on the turret control yoke, while looking through his scope. The yellow painted breech block recoiled backwards with a muffled ***boom***! Dust was kicked up in the tank, the whole metal beast rocked with the recoil of its 125mm main gun. A few wisps of smoke came in as the recoiling breech opened to eject the casing stub of the shell. Ratimir saw the round in his scope, a bright orange dot from the tracer material, arc towards the adult Lashies.

The round made contact just in front of a group 6 soldiers, when the explosion cleared somewhat, the small group was on the ground, twisted and torn.

More dead bodies.

Ratimir said "Target tank, gun right 20, HEAT, 550 meters, reload!"

The autoloader clanked and clanged as a HEAT round was brought up from the carousel. At the same time the casing stub was angled to the ejector port, and flung out the small hatch which automatically opened when a stub was about to be ejected, it closed shortly after.

The HEAT round was positioned in front of the open breach, its powder in a cassette above it. The mechanical rammer put the shell inside first, then the cassette with the powder charge came down, it went in after which the breech closed. Part of the auto loader went back down to the carousel, while the other part made ready to catch the stub.

Popov traversed the turret 20 degrees to the right, the turret motor whining as it went. The wolverine then engaged the laser range finder. The beam hit the oncoming tank, and reflected back to Popov's range finder, the solid state computer automatically adjusted the guns azimuth. Popov saw the reticle in his scope adjust as well. When he saw the loader indicator light in the reticle turn red he said "HEAT Up! Tank identified!"

"Fire!" Said Ratimir.

"Shot!"

Again the boom, the recoil and the rocking of the tank. Popov and Ratimir

both watch the round in their scopes trace towards the oncoming tank in its arc.

At this range it might as well have been touching the other tank, with their end of their barrel.

The HEAT round exploded dead center on the upper front plate of the dirty white painted tank. A jet of melted copper was in an instant pushed through the 3 inch steel plate, then once inside it expanded into a high speed white hot cone of molten metal. Ratimir had seen the inside of a tank hit after a HEAT round, super heated shrapnel ripping through fur and flesh like it was nothing, sometimes triggering a secondary explosion of the rounds inside.

Which in this case is what occurred.

The Lashie tank exploded almost instantly when the round hit. Sides burst open, a soldier near the tank was cut in half by a road wheel, another simply folded over to the ground when hit by shrapnel. The top half of the tank peeled open, and the turret flew in an almost slow motion way as it went up into the air, then it quickly fell back down and thudded down into the snowy ground. The contents of the tank fell back to the earth like morbid comets.

Other Lashie tanks shared smiler fates, in short order 10 enemy tanks had been knocked out. The only damage was a bank of smoke launchers ripped off on one of Ratimir's tanks.

The Lashies were going through their old stock on these mad attacks. *Might as well put them to good use* thought Ratimir.

Now to finish off the infantry.

Ratimir changed the orders, had his company fire at will at the oncoming infantry with HE/Frag and machine guns. Ratimir saw explosions out in no man's land. Vusk motors and field artillery where joining in now. The enemy only looked to be about two battalions worth of infantry coming in, some 1000 men. Infantry that had to clamber through craters, across bodies and barbed wire, uneven ground and what was left of the mines.

Here and there one Lashie Black Hat trooper hit a mine, and either he alone or his comrades around him either went up, or were cut down.

Ratimir opened the hatch, swung the HMG around on its ring, then swung the hatch away on it's ring. The pine marten pulled back the cocking rip cord, adjusted the guns azimuth with a rotating handle, then fired short bursts of rounds down range by the pressing the trigger paddle on the handle.

Ratimir didn't need to radio more commands, everything was automatic now, everything was detached.

The Lashies fired wildly with their battle rifles, some fired their single shot rocket launchers. Most of their shots missed.

Some Lashies were cut down by the tanks main guns or machine guns, or by the artillery. It wasn't a battle, it was just another slaughter. But Ratimir went through his motions again and again, much like a mechanical part of his tank.

He kept firing short and controlled bursts. Ratimir wasnt sure if it was his burst, or someone else's that tore a Lashie's arm off into a spinning bloody arc, but knew it did not matter. He simply kept sending bullets into the oncoming infantry, as if he was on a training range.

When the gun clicked empty, the pine marten began the laborious process of reloading the HMG. With the spare ammo boxes strapped outside and under his cupola, it took some effort to collect one, then set it on the HMG's cradle to reload. The only sound Ratimir made was a few tired grunts and curses.

Ratimir did it all automatically, without a shred of panic or really any feeling, which he knew in his distant way was for the best.

The Lashies coming at them wore the same uniform and gear as the children they sent out first, like them their tunics, field caps and helmets were black. But they were better armed with light machine guns, single shot rocket launchers, and the ubiquitous battle rifle.

Not that it did much difference however.

The infantry in the trench had long since joined the fray. The Lashies tried to use cover, hiding behind crater rims, tossed up mounds and ruts of earth, sometimes using rotting or still living bodies as sand bags.

The Lashies tried to get closer for hand grenades, while some used rifle grenades. Some of the Vusk's in the trenches were caught in the blasts, thrown back and down like discarded dolls. Some dropped as Lashie bullets tore through them. But they still fired, the artillery still exploded, the tanks still boomed away.

Time seemed to have left for Ratimir as the action continued. He absently heard over the radio as one tank had to stop firing its main gun due to an ejector malfunction. Another tank for the depot, Ratimir wondered if it would be repaired in time for the next probing attack, or worse.

The Lashies roared as they charged forward, some Ratimir was told later were singing songs of war. The canines went from cover to cover, trying to make it closer, pushed on by barking officers.

But it didn't seem to work, they just kept getting cut down. One of them looked to have a portable radio, Ratimir tried to gun him down but he was deep behind the cover of a berm of dirt and snow. One Lashie with an officers cap suddenly blew on a whistle, and what was left of the Lashies, maybe half of what came in, started to try and run away from the trench. Still the Vusk's kept firing.

The battle was ending as quickly as it had started. It really was nothing. Another probe, it was just the Lashies testing out the line again, testing for potential weak areas for the big offensives that came in the warmer seasons.

They had sacrificed children, tanks and men for a probe.

If Ratimir didn't feel so terribly tired, so utterly exhausted by the industrial slaughter, by the putrid smell of the tank and himself, by the sickening lack of proper sleep, Ratimir would have laughed at the insanity of it all. He was glad he didn't though, because that laughing would have turned to crying, and he knew he would not stop.

Ratimir called for a combat report from his tanks after he ordered them to cease fire. When the report of fuel levels, damage and mechanical reports and ammo levels came in, he ordered the company back to the tree line.

As the tank backed out of the embankment at a crawl, Ratimir noticed four soldiers being marched out of the trenches, their hands up and their deep green helmets off. They were being herded by officers and a small group of soldiers who had their assault rifles.

Other soldiers where going out into now man's land to lay more mines, to finish off the Lashie wounded that where to far gone, or to collect prisoners.

When the tank was clear of the embankment. The officers and armed soldiers had lined up the four in a line, the officer read off a piece of paper, though Ratimir did not hear the words over the tanks engine and tracks. One of the four in the line, a stoat, was visibly sobbing, his body racked by crying.

On a command by one of the officers, the soldiers brought up their assault rifles, and shot down the four.

Ratimir only watched, he didn't even flinch at the guns going off, and the four falling to the ground dead, like sacks of wet cement.

Executed for cowardice or some other such crime figured Ratimir.

When the tank finally made it back to the wood line, and turned around

to face the trench line, Ratimir felt the sense of detachment slowly ease away. He desperately wanted to hold onto it, just be in its embrace a moment longer, but knew it was futile. The detachment would ease away, and he would be his full self again, full thinking and emotional sense again. But even when he was his full self again, the tears and the sobbing did not come, just the after action business of refueling, rearming the tanks, of maintenance and paper work and food and so many other things.

So many other things that felt so very far away from what he and his crew and his company and every other soldier had done and gone through. Ratimir knew they would go through it again, and again and again until the warm seasons, when the real battles would start up again.

Ratimir wondered if he could be permanently detached from himself. He knew he would not be able to face the tears that would come next winter. Ratimir knew, he could not face the things he had done, and would rather be a walking corpse, mechanically going about the business of war.

Ratimir figured, he might as well think of himself as already dead. It was he figured, what he deserved. It made things easier.

When Ratimir finally did sleep that night, huddled up in a reeking sleeping bag in a log roofed dugout rear of the tanks, it was a dreamless sleep.

The pine marten had long thought, he no longer deserved to dream.

ANARKHIKÓS DOXA ACT I-1

by Stooser S.

Author's Note

Heya,

I am, at long bloody last, finally excited to submit this little fragment of my (some-day-to-be-finished) novel for this contest. I've been writing (and ideating!) this piece since around October of 2024, inspired by various events in my life and in the world in general. Furthermore, I'm very much in love with "hard sci-fi", a la Jules Verne, so you may see quite a few of these themes in this work, along with, of course, our favourite fuzzy little two-legged animals. I wish I had more to say about myself for this submission, but frankly, I do hope that, whoever you are that is reading this zine, you enjoy what I've made.

DOXA - Act I

"Of Platonic philosophy; opinion, common belief, unreasonable knowledge, knowledge of the lowest type. Imperfect beliefs on reality."

PHYSIS

"Of ancient Greek philosophy: physical world, nature."

"You don't know shit about who I am or what I do!" Kade yelled out at the male figure across the room from him, his screams interrupted by the occasional throaty gasp for air. "I—FUCK!" He brought his hands to his head, clutching his brown, messy hair, his snarl made up of a white-yellowish mosaic of canine teeth. The fi gure across the room simply observed this reaction, their face completely emotionless. The conservative talk show that had been playing on the television had faded away into the background, as various politicians and self-proclaimed philosophers fl ickered on the screen, each echoing the other's opinion, occasionally introducing someone from the opposing side, only to give them a minute or two of talk time.

"I always knew it. They've indoctrinated you. It took only what, a year? Just a year for them to turn you into this… this fucking mess. Look at yourself!" The figure said and jabbed a finger at Kade, a gesture that had been repeated so many times before. "You should be glad I still let you stay here. Where the fuck do you even plan to work with an arts degree?," the figure asked as they crossed their arms, staring down onto Kade.

"You still have no right to completely try to destroy everything I stand for every time I talk to you! Every—EVERY time I step into the house I grew up in, you do everything in your power to talk me down." Tears began to well up at Kade's eyes as he shouted across the room. His voice lost tone, with him trying to shout between gasps that resembled sobs more than anything else. "You despise everything about me!"

With a heavy step, the figure moved forwards, their form partially basked in the dim blue light of the television. Their fur, a mix of blacks and browns, contrasted against Kade's lighter coat, filled with more beige-ish and orange colours. The figure snarled, revealing a similar set of canine teeth as they looked at Kade from head to toe. "As if your degree shenanigans weren't enough. Of course

not. You had to go ahead and ensure that our family would never have any legacy because of your antics." The figure's dim grey eyes locked onto Kade's own glowing seas of honeyed yellow with a frozen stare, only interrupted by the occasional blink. "You are a fucking freak of nature, Kade. That's what you are."

Kade instinctively turned his head to the side to avoid looking at the figure in front of him. Even more tears welled up at his eyes, now rolling down his furred cheeks, leaving a burning, wet trail behind themselves. "How did mom even think about getting together with someone like you…" He spoke weakly, the volume of his voice barely above that of a whisper. "F-fuck you! How did I even think to call you my father in the first place?" He roared, his head suddenly whipping around to stare at his father and his silvery, emotionless eyes. His fists were already clenched, as if in preparation for what might come next.

His father did not respond. The newly created silence between them continued for a few more moments. Kade's father narrowed his eyes, shook his head and, uncrossing his arms, he turned around. He walked back over to the couch in front of the television, his steps heavy and slow, perhaps burdened with the last few months of constant arguing with his son. With a barely audible grunt, he sat back down onto the soft cushions, reaching for the remote carelessly discarded next to him. His furred fingers brushed over the rubbery buttons with a noticeable tremble. For a moment, the fl ickering political figures cast upon him by the screen seemed almost afraid of being turned off, as if the liquid crystal display was the only thing keeping them alive.

But no; the figures were just ridiculing some unknown, far-off idea, and a politician's cacophonous laughter was abruptly cut off by the press of the power button on the remote. The living room went dark, and nor was there any blue moonlight to set a scenic environment; the room turned into little more than a dark square.

Kade, having observed his father's sudden retreat, could do little but swallow hard, wiping the tears off of his face with the back of his hand. Tugging at the straps of his black tank top, he attempted to ground himself back in reality through touch. His canine vision allowed him to discern the outline of the figure of his father in the dark, which was completely unmoving, and all he could hear was his own, and his father's breathing. Grabbing the worn-down skateboard leaning on the door frame, he left the house without much ceremony. He closed

the door behind him rather weakly, certainly unlike how child-parent arguments tended to end; in most families, these usually ended with slammed doors and trembling hinges. But not with Kade.

He shivered slightly when he felt the night air lap at his fur once he stepped out. With one hand, he untied the plaid jacket tied around his waist, which was, at this point, more often tied there rather than worn as intended. He put it on without buttoning it up, and walked the brief paved path from his house until he reached the sidewalk. He began to walk along the street as he held the skateboard under his arm, with no direction in mind whatsoever. The harsh LED light of the streetlights above made him squint for a moment as his eyes adapted. This, however, wouldn't last long; after just a street, the neat and efficient LED light transitioned abruptly into the characteristic orange glow of sodium vapour lamps, the classic streetlight used for so many years. With the older lamps also came the graffiti and many other characteristics of the "rougher" part of town, from the occasional boarded-up window to old houses that had been listed as "for sale" for what seemed like decades. The rawness of it all was unlike the imposed sterility of home, but even here, his father's words kept bouncing around in his brain. Freak of nature. Indoctrinated.

On one wall, Kade turned to look at the squiggly tag of a long-gone graffiti artist. No one was quite sure where it came from, but some rumoured it had been drawn even before the war. The trails of spray paint swirled about the old concrete surface, like a litter of kittens playing and mingling together in the sterile contrast of an animal shelter. A smile tugged at Kade's lips upon seeing the tag. He shook his head, trying to return to reality, and kept walking.

Rummaging through his pockets, he retrieved an old, unmarked packet of cigarettes along with a cheap, navy-blue plastic lighter. He sat down the stairs of some long-closed store and set the skateboard to his left. The cracked 'OPEN' neon sign of the store threatened to fall at any moment. The interior of the front of the building itself was hidden by an opaque white tape stuck onto the glass from inside, and the logo of the local real estate company shone proudly as a sticker on the door, loudly proclaiming 'FOR SALE!' along with a phone number under it. Kade lit one of the cigarettes, taking a deep breath of nicotine-filled smoke. The substance fl owed through his veins, his muscles somewhat relaxing despite his throat holding in a cough. He really had to stop smoking, didn't he?

He looked up at the sodium lights above and closed his eyes, breathing out a cloud of smoke. The effects of the nicotine, the warmth of the lights, and the cool air of the night seemed to brush away his worries. A relaxed smile spread across his face when he took the second puff of the cigarette and quickly exhaled the smoke, the lit end slowly burning up. The bitter taste of smoke didn't bother him at all, and instead only helped to numb his senses further. College assignments, his father's words… all of it began to fade away, tuned out into the background, replaced by the reality of the here and the now. These parts of town were raw and unrefined, but to Kade, they were authentic, and far more real than the glittery city centre. This was his domain, albeit not in a sense of control. He was utterly unbothered by the litter here and there, or the occasional broken window, or the graffiti sprayed on nearly every abandoned vertical surface. He let out a soft chuckle, thinking about how corporate agents would probably have a stroke if they dared to venture into these parts of the Citadel.

His trance was rudely interrupted by the soft hum of a hybrid engine. Kade opened his eyes and turned his head to the right to see a black car turning the corner. He quickly noticed the antennas on the roof and the little blue lights on the dashboard; an unmarked police vehicle. Two plain-clothed officers sat in their neat suits in the front. Kade immediately tensed up, but tried to remain calm. Previous memories of arrests and detainments fl ashed about in his head; mostly for vandalism when he was caught in the act of spraying his graffiti onto walls of buildings both old and new. The car slowed as it approached Kade, until it came to a complete stop. Kade looked up to meet the gaze of the driving officer who, after a second of eye contact, turned to his partner and began to talk about something. Kade heard muffl ed police jargon from within the car which Kade could somewhat decipher; something about "operational security".

The argument between the two officers seemed to end as quickly as it started, and the window rolled down. "Hey, you alright?" asked the driver, "'Bit late, and this part of town is pretty rough." Kade froze up, as the last thing he was expecting was a friendly question, especially coming from a plainclothed officer. He extinguished his half-smoked cigarette against the concrete stairs.

"I'm… alright. Just needed a breather." He tried to avoid eye contact with the officer, who observed Kade's dishevelled form intently. The officer's partner seemed to intentionally avoid participating in the conversation, looking out the other window.

“You sure you don’t wanna head home? We can give you a ride.” The officer offered, a wide smile present on his face. Their partner, on the other hand, just grumbled and facepalmed. Before Kade could respond, the driver looked about their vehicle for a moment, before grabbing the chilled can of Fanta sitting in the cupholder.

“Yeah, I’m sure. Home is the last place I want to be right now.” Kade muttered a barely audible “fuck”, as he remembered that he should have probably just shut up and ignored the officer instead of mentioning his issues in front of the plainclothed stranger. ‘Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law’ … right?

The smile on the officer’s face dropped as he heard Kade’s response. “If you say so.” He put his hand up, letting Kade see the can of Fanta. “Want some? Haven’t opened it yet, I gotta cut down on my sugar anyway. Barely passed the fitness check-up last time.” He chuckled softly.

A smile appeared on Kade’s face, his tail wagging slightly behind him, the fur brushing against the concrete stairs as he reestablished eye contact with the officer and extended his hand to catch the can. “Sure,” he responded as his mind tried to fight back; what if the officer was trying to get his DNA? Or his fingerprints? Or accuse him of something? Kade tried to dismiss these paranoid thoughts as the officer tossed the orange can over to Kade, the still-sealed aluminium vessel landing perfectly in Kade’s right hand. “Cheers.” Kade said before pulling on the tab of the can and opening it with a pop. He took a sip and was very pleasantly surprised; European Fanta, undisturbed by the high-fructose corn syrup that the American version was famous for.

“Stay safe, will ya? We’ll be patrolling around tonight if anything happens, so you know who to ring.” The officer said as he brought his hand up to his ear, making a “phone call” gesture. He rolled up the window, and pressed on the accelerator before he could give his partner a chance to resume their argument, or create a new one. Kade just gave the officer a brief wave.

He watched the vehicle speed off into the night as he took another sip of soda. A feeling of surprise overtook him; the CMPD’s “plainclothies” weren’t particularly known for being friendly. He took one last gulp of the Fanta before tossing the empty can into an overfl owing bin to his left that the garbage trucks had prob-

ably missed for the past few weeks.

He stood up and brushed off the dust that had clung onto his sweatpants, before picking up his skateboard. Faced with a decision, he looked out towards the imposing skyscrapers in the centre of the city that, even though they seemed to be so far away, were closer than one would think. Their silhouettes never lacked of illumination — either sunny in the day, or beaming with light from screens and windows. Despite the late night, many of the windows were still very much lit, most of which likely belonged to either overworked office workers or equally stressed students.

From this distance, the lights resembled an imitation of the night sky, in a place where the light pollution didn't allow practically any stars to shine through. The light in the windows turned on and off, almost like stars dying or being born.
"Oi, you got a lighter?" A voice called out from behind Kade, thus forcing him to pay attention to reality again. He whipped around; behind him, stood a possum just a bit shorter than him, whose hoarse voice didn't at all fit with what he looked like. He wore an oversized, grey hoodie, complimented with a pleated tartan skirt that reached down to just above his knees.

The confidence and casual manner in which the possum wore this all made Kade freeze up for a moment, before he mumbled a quiet "Yeah, one sec", and fetched the lighter from a pocket. The possum leaned forwards slightly, an unusually long cigarette wobbling in his mouth as Kade lit it.
"Cheers, mate." The possum took a deep breath from the cigarette and exhaled it off to the side, as to not blow smoke into Kade's face. "Shit, man, you look familiar. I seen you around here before?" He inquired, with his voice of a chain smoker.

"Eh… dunno. Maybe. I'm around here fairly often." Kade responded, unsure of how to avoid having to say he didn't even live here, and yet pretended to be a part of this section of the city.

A sly smile made itself present on the possum's face. "Ah, you think I ain't got a brain in this skull of mine, eh?" He reached out with a hand, gently pushing Kade's shoulder. "All the city kids who pretend like they've been born in the rough say this." He chuckled heartily, before giving Kade a few slaps on the shoulder. "Go on, lad," he said, and with these words, he promptly left, walking

down further into the ghetto.

Kade resisted the urge to scratch his head in confusion. Who even was that? The interaction planted a seed of a thought in his head. He wasn't from this place. He'd never been. He simply saw it as a refuge from home, as a place where nothing but emotion, intimacy, and honesty existed, as raw and gritty as it all got. But he didn't belong here, and at times, he came dangerously close to his cover being blown.

No matter. He had, however, already made a subconscious decision on whether going down to the city centre was worth it at this time.

First, though, clearing his mind seemed like a good idea.

He set the skateboard down onto the ground and, feeling the wood creak underneath his shoes, rolled off down the street.

Kade looked towards the general direction of the skate park, illuminated by the orange streetlights, the same way as the surrounding space. Just barely, he could discern someone sitting on the fl at upper part of one of the smaller ramps, their legs dangling back and forth. Kade wondered: someone sitting alone in the park, at this time of night?

He took a few more steps and squinted his eyes to take a closer look, before a daunting realization crept up on him. The person's silhouette looked just like him.

Zephyr, his form recognizable even with his back turned to Kade in the dim light.

"Oh, this motherfucker…" Kade muttered through his teeth, clenching the skateboard under his left arm even tighter than before. A strange surge of anger fl ashed through his mind, and he began to walk towards the familiar figure of Zephyr, every step of his trot a precisely calculated movement, almost like a cat sneaking up on its prey. Kade, however, felt far more like the prey than the cat.

As he got closer, Kade could make out the furred dragon's appearance in more detail; the turquoise, smooth fur; the inky black tattoos along the sides of his

waist… He looked the exact same as he did on that day.

In his mouth, Zephyr held a strawberry Chupa-Chups, twirling it around his tongue as he stared down onto the screen of his phone. He idly scrolled past unending, algorithmic content that shoved itself in his face like some sort of drug, to the point where he couldn't even be bothered to hear Kade's approaching footsteps behind him.

Kade jumped up onto the curve of the small ramp, the sound of his boots as they hit the worn concrete forcing Zephyr to spontaneously snap out of his phone-induced trance. Expecting it to be a certain someone else, a sly smile appeared on Zephyr's furred face as he turned around to face Kade.

"Oh, hello—" He mumbled with that usual, sickeningly honeyed voice that Kade knew far too well.

The corners of Zephyr's stupid grin quickly went back down, and his eyes took on a stern frown.

"You again? Didn't I block you from… just about everywhere?" Zephyr withdrew the candy from his mouth as he spoke to Kade, who glared at him with an equally stern stare. His voice returned to its usual, rather "bitchy" tone.

Kade forced himself to hold back a snarl. "Oh, I know that. If you think I'm here stalking you or whatever the fuck you've got going in your head already, then be relieved, that's not why I'm here. I wasn't even thinking about you, really. Just wanted to clear my head a bit, but obviously that wasn't to be, was it?" He shoved his hands into his pockets, as to not let Zephyr see them turn into fists. He glared deep into Zephyr's eyeliner-smudged eyes, despite the doubt that doing so stirred within him.

"Then what the fuck do you need from me?" Zephyr smirked, crossing his fishnet-clad legs as he stared down at Kade, eye level slightly above him thanks to the ramp's elevation.

"Not much. Just wanted to, you know, catch up." Kade's voice brimmed with buried anger that, slowly but surely, began to emerge. "What are you doing out and about at these hours, anyway? When you're not getting fucked, I mean."

Zephyr let out a throaty chuckle, before once more shoving the Chupa-Chups into his mouth. “Pfft! What’s it to you? What, you interested in getting back together, big guy?” Zephyr leaned forwards teasingly, letting Kade catch a full glimpse of the furred dragon’s high-waisted, tight latex bodysuit that left little to the imagination of the upper part of his body.

“Not at all. Just wanted to see if you’ve changed or not.” Kade took a step back as Zephyr leaned in. “Clearly, you haven’t. Not one damn bit.”

“Come on, Kadey, don’t you remember me? All the fun nights we used to have?” Zephyr put his phone away into the barely-there pockets of his shorts, before he hopped off of the fl at part of the ramp and landed right in front of Kade. Now, Zephyr had to look up at Kade, instead of down.

“Fun nights?!” Kade raised his voice, almost on the verge of shouting. He spread his arms as he leaned a bit closer to Zephyr, letting the skateboard fall down onto the concrete with a wooden thud. “You—you got fucked by like, three other people, in front of my own fucking eyes! And then you had the audacity of asking me to join in in your debauchery like you’re some— some new-hire at the whorehouse!” He brought his arms back down to his sides, practically shouting right at Zephyr’s face. Kade no longer tried to hide the scowl on his face that slightly bared his teeth, or the clenching of his fists.

Zephyr’s face took on an expression of pity, his head tilted slightly to the side as he looked at Kade’s angered form from head to toe. “Aw, come on, Kadey. You don’t have to get like this, you know? I can always help you out if you need me to.” Zephyr gave a clenched half-smile, lowering his tone as he spoke. He reached out with his right hand, gently running it down Kade’s side. Once his hand brushed over Kade’s waist, Zephyr gave his jacket a gentle tug.

In mere milliseconds, the memories of that night fl ashed in Kade’s mind as soon as he felt Zephyr’s unmistakable, gentle touch, even through his clothing. How Zephyr oh-so-teasingly invited Kade out for a night in one of Citadel’s underground clubs; how Zephyr ran his hands past the waistband of Kade’s sweatpants; how he, having grabbed his arm, led him into one of the side-rooms that was already brimming with people, all grinning at the sight of the furred dragon…

Kade's eyes fl ashed with anger. With one fist, he slammed down onto Zephyr's arm that reached for his jacket. His snarl revealed itself fully, teeth bared as if he were about to bite down onto Zephyr's neck. Wrinkles formed all along his snout as he watched Zephyr through glaring eyes. The furred dragon stepped back against the raised section of the ramp, holding the part of his arm where Kade's fist made contact with a pained look on his face, teeth clenched together. "The fuck are you doing?!" He hissed at Kade and looked up from his arm, staring up at the canine. His eyes, open wide, betrayed the attempt at anger in his clenched teeth.

Without a second thought, utterly consumed by rage towards the furred figure in front of him, Kade closed the newly formed distance between himself and Zephyr. Keeping his gaze firmly fixated on Zephyr's pained eyes, he reeled his fist back, and, all within the fraction of a second, violently threw it right into the side of the furred dragon's muzzle. Zephyr's head jerked to the left as the weight of the impact forced him to spit out whatever was left of his half-eaten Chupa-Chups.

Zephyr leaned back against the slope of the ramp as he brought his palm to the impact site on the side of his muzzle. His face contorted in a grimace of pain; his teeth were clenched hard enough that he feared they'd crack if he put any more pressure on them. Finally, he gathered the strength to look up from the fl oor back up at Kade. There still stood Kade, fists by his sides, his expression as angered as before. He unclenched the fist he had used to deliver the impact and gave it a few brief shakes in the air, as if trying to get rid of the pain.

Involuntarily, Zephyr looked behind Kade as he noticed strange, shadowy movement in the dim sodium lights. Once he could discern the figure approaching Kade from behind, he instinctually smiled through clenched teeth.

"The fuck are you grinning at, whore?! Or do you want me to knock out those pearly whites of yours—" Kade screamed at Zephyr, his vocal cords threatening to rip at any moment. In all of his anger, he had been completely oblivious to the stomping of steel-toed military boots right behind him.

"HANDS OFF, MUTT!" A rough male voice sounded, close enough to make Kade's ears ring.

He felt someone's firm grip on both of his shoulders. Whoever it was, he spun Kade around in place fast enough so that all Kade saw was a brief fl ash of tan fur and a shimmer of leather clothing in the light; a sight followed up by the pressure and crushing feeling of an uppercut straight to his chin that sent vibrations rippling through his skull, and left little lights fl oating around in his vision.

Before he could even bring his head back down, the strange figure swept Kade's legs with the accuracy of a martial artist. With a thud that reverberated through his spine, Kade collapsed on his back, landing onto the cold concrete of the ramp, right in front of Zephyr. Thankfully, his back and his neck had received the brunt of the impact, so his head remained relatively untouched.

The orange glow of the streetlights above swam and mixed with the sight of the strange figure towering right above him. Kade brought his hands to his face, giving his injured chin a rub to try and help with the sharp ache that still pounded in his jaw. He blinked, and saw that Zephyr had already repositioned himself to stand to the side of the figure, holding the side of the muzzle where Kade had delivered his punch. Even through the pulsing pain, Zephyr still managed to force out a sly smile, that exact same one that Kade knew all too well.

As his vision somewhat cleared up, he could finally discern the new figure before him. A hyena standing at just about 6'2, clad in a leather jacket and pants, the outfit accentuated by a strange, red armband tied on his right arm. He reeked of cheap cologne. Kade instinctually moved his hands to try and get back up, only to be met with the hyena bringing his boot right onto Kade's gut, knocking the air out of the canine's lungs.

"And stay down, dog." The hyena grumbled, his dark brown eyes boring deep into Kade's soul. He looked around, and quickly saw his next target; Kade's skateboard, carelessly discarded in the heat of the moment. With a scowl on his face, the hyena picked up the fragile board. All while keeping his boot firmly planted on Kade's abdomen, he slammed the frail wood of the board against his knee, sending splinters of painted wood and remains of clear tape fl ying onto the fl oor as the whole thing split in half with a painful crack.

The hyena tossed the remains of the skateboard off to the side before turning his gaze back towards Kade. "Let's just hope you've learned, hm?" He hissed through his teeth.

A pained groan escaped Kade's mouth as he let his head fall back down onto the concrete. The fl oating lights that had invaded his sight just a few moments ago remained there, and gained a certain clarity to them; as he stared up at the night sky, clear of stars and of clouds alike, for a moment he thought that the bright blurs in his vision really were stars. After a few more blinks, however, the illusion was gone.

Zephyr and the hyena conversed, their voices too quiet for Kade, in his stunned state, to properly make out what they were talking about. He could almost feel the duo hurl another penetrating glance at him, before the relieving sound of fading footsteps and conversation finally reached Kade's ears.

Once the hum of a diesel engine filled the air, Kade at last found the strength to rise up from the ramp. He brushed off the concrete dust from his clothes, before he shot a glare at what remained of his skateboard. The sad two chunks of wood with two wheels each lay abandoned on the fl oor. Kade ran over and picked the parts up with trembling hands as he desperately tried to fit the two parts back together, hopelessly sticking together the little bits of tape that used to hold the whole thing together. He crouched down, still in his futile attempts to try and repair the board. Once the bits of tape could no longer stay stuck to the pieces, he at last gave up and practically threw them down onto the ground.

Involuntarily, memories of him as just a 15-year-old skating around the park most of the day once school hours would end, without a single care or bother in the world, made themselves known. The taste of bubblegum in his mouth growing gradually more and more stale as the hours went on, the roughness on his knees from the constant scrapes and falls, the laughs of older teens in the park…

With a sigh, he got back up and licked off the metallic taste of blood on his broken lip, his tongue inadvertently pushing against his teeth. The canine's canine felt a bit looser in its socket than before.

An ice pack to his chin would probably do wonders right about now. In his mind, Kade retraced the way to the shop that his hazy memory swore that should still be around. After one last rub to his strained neck, he took off, following the imaginary directions projected in his head.

Kade soon found himself bathed in the neon lights of the 24-hour store. He looked to the windows, far thicker than in a usual store; indeed, the taped-over gunshot mark right in the front that he remembered so well was still very much there. Posters slapped one over another, untouched for years, had begun to form a strange, thick skin that clung in rectangular shapes to the windows. Some belonged to local punk bands that had, over the times, dissolved, with their members most often either shot dead in an alleyway or locked behind bars of the Citadel's Correction Services. Others, to the occasional public service announcements.

At one point, half-hidden behind all these layers of print paper, Kade noticed a slogan that rung too many bells in his head: "Citadel First". It seemed to be among the very first of the posters, likely stuck onto the glass in the first years of the Citadel's existence. It was something of a miracle no one had torn their way through the skin of paper to sell the poster as a historical niche collector's item.

To Kade, however, what mattered most was the question whether a certain someone was still present in the store. He stopped before the entrance for a few seconds. The hesitancy of meeting them, however, didn't take long to be overridden by the burning ache in Kade's chin and the desire to put something cold to it.

Once he pushed open the door, an action always accompanied by the clinking of a small bell overhead, his eyes immediately went towards the cashier.

"Yeah, yeah, and you know what he tells me after—" the cashier spoke, his eyes moving on their own accord to look at Kade, "—oooh shit, hold on, I'll call you back—" The shopkeeper's face lit up like a star in the countryside sky, as he dropped the ongoing call with a careless toss of his phone onto the counter. "Well, fuck me sideways, look at what the cat dragged in!" He exclaimed, straightening his position.

Kade responded to the cashier's excited reaction with a stern glare. "I'd rather not right now. I wouldn't have thought to step foot in this shithole of yours if it wasn't for that fucker." He gave the interior of the store a brief scan; fl oors that were probably mopped once or twice a week, half-empty fridges, and dwindling supplies of snacks and drinks on the shelves. A little section all the way at the back was filled with cleaning supplies, untouched to the point where Kade could swear he saw a spider web in its corner. After all, this establishment was not

most people's first choice when it came to grocery shopping.

"Don't tell me." The cashier's jaw dropped. "You saw him again tonight?" He said, taking note of Kade's roughened-up appearance.

"Yes, Sammy. Zephyr. No, not because I wanted to see him." Kade felt the fire from before begin to reignite, despite the attempts to hold it back. His hands, shoved back into his pockets, tensed up again.

"That explains your, uh… inelegant look, let's just say that much. Though, I can't really judge, now can I?" Sammy let out a chuckle as he looked over his own appearance, accentuated by his work uniform, stained with bleach in some places. Something flashed in Kade's eyes again as he stepped closer, placing his hands firmly down onto the counter. The height advantage over the sitting cashier gave Kade a bit more confidence than usual. "You think I'm a dumbass, Samuel?! You think I want to be your buddy again, after you fucked Zephyr along with the others, right in front of my eyes?" Kade shouted, and yet, the approaching flood of tears that threatened to escape his eyes became more intense than his reignited anger.

The poor cashier rolled back up against the wall on his worn-down office chair, the wheels squeaking as he did so. "Look, man, I— I just, didn't want to end our friendship to end like this, you know? Besides, I'm sure you already knew what kind of person Zephyr was—" He held his hands up at the level of his head, as if surrendering to the canine before him.

"I don't want to hear it from a bastard who dropped out of college just to end up working in this shithole of a store!" Kade's whole face trembled, tears pushing insistently against his eyes as they threatened to leave at any moment.

"Kade, I—" Sam reached out towards Kade who, having already forgotten what he had even entered the store for, stormed out of the establishment and slammed the door behind him with enough force to send the little bell crashing down onto the ground.

Kade shut his eyes as hard as he could to stop the incoming flow of tears. He succeeded in this attempt, the cityscape unfolding before him once more.

Rarely, if ever, did he consider the city centre to be a place to unwind.

But after tonight's events, neither wallowing in the misery of the "Unmarked Sector", as the City Senators euphemized it as, nor returning home seemed like appealing options.

Before Kade unfolded the sight of the decrepit, yet somehow still operational entrance to the subway station. The metal frame around the descent into the station itself had begun to rust, the silver-y rust-proof paint doing little to protect the metal underneath once time chipped it away. Of the two lights set up in the corners of the frame, only one worked, and even then, seemed to be living on borrowed time.

The station didn't see much use to begin with; and late in the night, that fact became all the more obvious. The sound of someone's exhausted footsteps reached Kade. Trudging their way up the stairs, Kade saw a fellow canine, dressed in jeans and a wrinkled white shirt that bore the logo of Citadel's Combined Higher Education Centre. In their right paw, they held a plastic cup of coffee that had likely long since gone cold. Slung around their shoulder, a tan bag filled with study supplies, supported by their other paw.

A grimace of pure weariness had overtaken the canine's face, with sunken eyes and puffy eyebags that were visible through the layer of fur, and downturned corners of their mouth that indicated doneness in its most pure form. Their sight had no direction whatsoever as they stared into utter nothingness, not even bothering to respond to Kade's involuntary attempt at eye contact. His gaze lingered on the fellow canine's form, before he began his own descent into the station. Once he was a few steps in, the thick, warm air of the station hit him like a wall. The humidity made him consider that, if it were cold enough, a fog could easily form indoors.

Kade tried his best to ignore the stale stench permeating the station as he finally reached the platform. He looked up at the arrival display board hanging off the ceiling.

"GOVERNANCE SECTOR – 2:12", as shown by the dim, yellow text.

Arriving in just a few minutes. Perfect.

Kade stopped before the glass-and-steel barrier that was the checkpoint to gain actual access to the platform. Almost dropping his wallet, he dug around in it until he found a weathered plastic card, with bright letters stating "CITADEL STUDENT'S METRO PASS". He fl ipped it around to see the expiration date: 20/06/2053. Two more weeks left before renewal. He let the checkpoint machine have a brief taste of the card, before it spat the plastic out with an affirmative beep.

Having finally stepped onto the humid concrete of the platform, Kade gave his surroundings a brief scan. Dusty fl oor tiles, the occasional dripping ceiling pipe… these things always left him wondering whether the person in charge of maintaining this station was even alive anymore. As for the people, at this time he shared the platform with only one other person; a woman, dressed in a rather neat business suit for someone traveling at this time of day. She occasionally blew a bubble made of gum, endlessly scrolling through her phone.

The screeching of subway brakes against rails brought Kade right out of his introspective trance. He glanced to his left to see the eye-like headlights of the train rapidly approach, even as they gradually slowed down. The train pierced the shadows of the tunnel and, at last, came to a stop with a huff. The doors hissed open, and before making his way in, Kade noticed that only two or three individuals disembarked on this station.

He stepped into the carriage, happy to find plenty of empty seats. Even if they were made of plastic, sitting on something that wasn't concrete tonight was oddly relieving. Just as he expected, the carriage he had chosen didn't brim with much activity or presence at all. Most of the people in it were either being entertained by their phones, or dozing off. Some odd one was reading a book, titled "American Gods." Kade could have sworn that the bloody thing looked bigger than the Bible itself.

He, however, opted to join those who were dozing off. He let himself melt into the seat, bringing a surprising sensation of relief to his previously injured neck. Following a few beeps, the doors shut and Kade felt the inertia move him a slight bit to the left. With his eyes half-closed, he let the gentle vibrations of the carriage slowly lull him into a state of quasi-unconsciousness. He put far too much

confidence into the automated announcer that occasionally spoke of upcoming stations through the overhead speakers, but even if he were to miss his destination, he didn't exactly have anywhere to be.

"Commercial Zone, arriving at: Hughes Station."

"Residential Zone, arriving at: Sugar House Park."

"Financial District, arriving at: Exiton Headquarters."

The announcer's robotic statements all melted in Kade's head into one singular mess of words, irrelevant to him for the time being, as the train continually stopped and took off again and again. Even while dozing off, however, he couldn't help but wonder who did the Citadel's planners even hire to name all of these districts in such a ridiculously unoriginal way.

"Governance Sector, arriving at: Square of the Atom. Reminder, this is the last station in the route. All remaining passengers must disembark. Any loss or theft of personal items is not considered the responsibility of the Citadel Transit Authority."

And that was his cue to make his way on out.

Stepping out of the metro, he was met by the staggering contrast that was the Square of the Atom station compared to where he had first embarked. Clean, cool air; architecture that mixed brutalism with aesthetics into a functional yet beautiful combination; well-groomed officers of the Citadel Metropolitan Police department on their usual foot patrols around the metro, some of them even making small talk with people that came and went as part of the movement of the crowds.

What all the stations shared, however, was the sensation of lassitude of the city's residents that permeated the air thoroughly in the late hours of the night. Kade had to weave past the crowds consisting of mostly exhausted workers and students, occasionally mumbling quiet apologies each time he bumped or shoved past someone. He took a brief mental note of a small grouping of teenagers that stood away from the human fl ux, dressed in punk-like outfits, cackling at each other's jokes, smoking as if their lungs were invincible. Most of them were

human, with a singular outlier in the form of a coyote. A pair of passing CMPD officers gave them a suspicious look, before moving on with their patrol.

As Kade emerged from the station, he was met by a sight he usually had no reason to see. The Citadel, in all of its LED-basked glory, unravelled itself before him. Skyscrapers stretched up into the sky, their pointy roofs threatening to tear a hole through the night that blanketed the city. Below, a fl ood of storefronts and high-rise apartment buildings, the latter often stacked on top of the former. The lights of both advertisements and streetlights would be blinding for anyone not used to them.

As much as the Citadel's urban planners loved to put labels on things before they were even built, the name of the "Governance Sector", located in the very core of the city, simply implied the presence of most of the city's public service headquarters. Indeed, Kade's thoughts on the matter were reaffirmed as he caught sight of the CMPD's headquarters, effectively an oversized police station, a few streets away.

Even in the presence of this strange light show of the city, the monument that lay right ahead of Kade had a certain atmosphere radiating from it that effortlessly dwarfed whatever the consumerist spirits of the stores or grandiose ambitions of the skyscrapers had to offer.

A representation of Rutherford's atomic model, carved with granite in the form of a statue standing at a precise 92 meters. The "nucleus", composed of spheres stuck right in the middle of the monument, seemed to practically fl oat; as did the "electrons", smaller orbs that followed the path of thin granite orbits drawn around the nucleus. The illusion of the nucleus' levitation was, in fact, no illusion, as proven by the yellow signs with black text stating "EXTREMELY STRONG ELECTROMAGNETS, DO NOT APPROACH" attached to every side of the fence delimiting a 10-meter radius around the monument. Floodlights built into the same pedestal as the magnets kept the statue constantly illuminated throughout the night.

To Kade, even having already seen the monument plenty of times, every occasion was like the very first one. As he lost himself in the mesmerizing, barely noticeable up-and-down movement of the nucleus and of the electrons that moved following the orbits, a strange pang of melancholy surged from within

his mind. An utter insignificance in the face of the city that was dismissive to the matters of its residents; that seemed to live and breathe on its own accord, that as artificially as it had originally been made, had a nature of its own. The atom towered so high up above him, for a moment it became hard to believe that, at its base, it represented what everything was made of. Carved into the pedestal, which took up about 15 meters of the monument's height, was a solemn phrase and motto of the Citadel:

"MAY THE ATOM SERVE PEACE, AND ONLY PEACE."

Kade read over the letters a few times over, as if dissecting them.

Someone lightly tugged at the back of his jacket.

They tugged again, and only the second time did Kade finally return to the real world.

He turned around, to find a protogen's cyan blue eyes staring right back at him. They stood much shorter than Kade, at around 5'4.

"Hello? Sir?" The protogen's voice sounded rather… digital, unlike the few protogens who Kade had heard before, who all spoke with recognizable human-like voices. Kade scanned the little fellow from head-to-toe, only now noticing how the flow of people bent past and around the two, as if they were standing in a river.

"Uh—s-sorry, you need anything?" Kade responded, voice tinged with confusion. He looked down at the fuzzy shape held in their arms, and found a plushie of a Vaporeon, the protogen holding it tightly to their chest. As far as Kade knew, protogens weren't capable of having children…

"No, not at all!" Their face glowed with childlike wonder. "I'm just out here exploring. My name is Finder, by the way."

Finder. As if that made it any clearer.

"Finder? Are you… are you alone out here?" Kade raised an eyebrow.

“No. The Caretaker is watching me!” They said so casually, like it was a usual thing for them to be watched. Kade searched around the loose bits floating around in his memory for the name. The Caretaker, the AI that the Citadel’s government put far too much confidence in, letting it handle all manner of administrative operations all by itself.

The protogen seemed to notice the brief confusion on Kade’s face. “The Caretaker is the central AI constructed in the lower levels of the Tower of Governance,” they pointed up at the large, office-like building just past the monument, “that handles most bureaucratic tasks.” Their tone changed for a second, as if they were reading off a teleprompter.

“No, no, I know who that is—why exactly are you being, “watched” by him?” Kade wondered. He couldn’t take his eyes off the plushie in their hands.

Again, the protogen’s visor shone with delight. “I’m a Finder! My job is to get new data for the Caretaker by exploring the city and talking to the citizenry. It’s a new program to help improve and build upon AI using the most organic data!” Their vocabulary resembled a strange mix of teenage speak and academic terminology.

Kade nodded to himself. “That… makes sense, I guess.” He unglued his eyes from the plushie and stared right at the cyan LED eyes on the sides of the protogen’s visor.

An awkward silence emerged between the two. The protogen, however, didn’t seem to consider it awkward at all.

“Can I go with you for a bit? I just got out last night, haven’t seen much of the city yet!” They inquired. Out of nowhere, they poked at the fabric of Kade’s tank top, likely to gather sensory data.

Kade hesitated, looking down to the protogen’s finger. As much as he wanted to spend the rest of the night alone, how could he say no to that little black-and-cyan face?

“Fine…” He half-grumbled before he took off in an aimless direction. Up ahead, lay the wide main street of the Governance Sector. The protogen followed faith-

fully, occasionally making brief scans of the way Kade looked, walked, breathed, where his eyes went… As he gave the protogen suspicious glances, Kade's thoughts instantly went to the possibility that maybe the whole thing was just a cover-up for a new surveillance tool. Alas, even if it were the case, his paranoidal mind was quickly overwhelmed by simple indifference.

Kade looked up at the occasional giant screens up ahead that basked the streets below in even more light. Most of them displayed government advertisements, with the "Citadel First" slogan. Some had the privilege of promoting small businesses around the area. But curiously, none of the adverts belonged to corporations.

Like a disorderly stream, the Citadel's residents made their way through the street, all of them just as dismissive of each other. Most were, as Kade already expected, workers going home for the night. Fatigued faces marked deeply with caffeine, eyebags sinking so far low you'd think they could be checked in at an airport as extra baggage, crumpled business suits or blue-collar work clothes… What surprised him, though, was the lack of partypeople one would be expecting to find at these hours of the night. Just a few loners or small groups, most already on their way home.

The sirens of a CMPD cruiser blared past, as whatever vehicles still on the roads quickly yielded to the officers.

Soon enough, the landscape of the Governance Sector began to abruptly shift from its European style of natural urban growth to the all-too-familiar, sterile grids of the Financial District. The screen above no longer bore promotions of small businesses, now replaced by high-budget corporate adverts. Logos of Exiton Factory, Protonics Armoured Corporation, Nightingale Health Corporation, all stuck onto their respective headquarters and suboffices.

Kade shuddered. This part of the city always felt… uneasy to him, hence he rarely visited it. Inhuman, mechanical, like an algorithm designed for nothing but the most pure of profit extraction, with streets much emptier than those of other city sections. He found his fears confirmed as he glared at a pair of Exiton's security synths and their frozen expressions, both holding a strangely modern version of an AK-12. They stood by at the entrance of Exiton's headquarters.

They shot a dead glance back at Kade, prompting him to look away, at the fl oor.

“Huh? Are you alright?” The protogen, who still followed, perked up as he noticed Kade’s unease.

“Yeah, I just… I never like this part of the city. I don’t think I’ve even noticed we were headed its way, and now we’re already through, like, half of it.” Kade still felt the remnants of the synths’ mechanical stares run down his spine.

“It’ll be fine, I’m sure! Besides, we’re safe here.” The little fellow tried their best to cheer up the canine as they followed him. Only once Kade looked back to them did he take note that the protogen was not wearing any clothing, instead covered head-to-toe in beige fur. Their body followed a more “classical” protogen anatomy; metal upper legs with blue lights on the sides, a chest plate, finned panels on the side of the head…

The protogen’s words of encouragement forced a slight smile to appear on Kade’s face. “I guess we are.”

Kade looked forwards once more, met with a peculiar sight; two businessmen in crumpled suits, one a man of Asian descent and the other a bobcat, walking down in the direction opposite to Kade’s. The man’s eyes sparked with a sort of strange excitement, and he talked so fast Kade could barely make out what he said. His hands dug into his briefcase with force, his steps and gestures frantic, as if he had downed a full bottle of caffeine pills. The bobcat, on the other hand, had a scowl of annoyance and doneness on his face as he stared down at the phone in his right hand.

“And then, you know, what if we, uh—” The man spoke in a hurry.

“WILL YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP?!” The bobcat snapped and whipped around to face the businessman beside him, shoving him away with a rough push. “I don’t give a singular fl ying fuck about your projects anymore! You’ve gone bankrupt for the THIRD FUCKING TIME this year! I don’t care about whatever fucking Bad Dragon rip-off idea you had yesterday! You switched from producing silicon chips to making silicon dildos, for fuck’s sake!” He yelled at his business partner with no hesitation, loudly enough for his voice to echo through

the mostly desolate streets.

The protogen beside Kade brought their hands up to their far bigger than usual ears, their eyes closed in a pained expression. Without thinking twice, Kade also tried to help drown out the noise and put his paws over their ears as well. He speedwalked, trying to usher the protogen away from the scene.

A wave of relief washed over Kade once he heard the bobcat's rant cease, and his footsteps storm off away from his partner. The man tried to reach out and follow the bobcat, but was rejected with another shove.

"Jesus… what was all that about?" Kade asked himself, even if he had clearly heard the confrontation. He let go of the poor protogen who, still shaken, clung tightly onto their Vaporeon plushie.

"Buh… they screamed so loud that my ears hurt." The protogen shook their head like they were trying to get water out of their ears.

Kade smiled and gave his fl uffy ears a gentle pat. "Yeah, it's what you sometimes see in the big city. You're gonna have to get used to it, if you want to follow that mission of yours." A slight pout appeared on the protogen's face in response. "Sometimes, it's… a bit worse in the rougher areas. But you'll be fine." He ruffl ed the fur atop the protogen's head, forcing the pout to morph into a smile.

"I hope I will!" They exclaimed.

A far-off sign on the side of a pharmacy announced the time. Kade had to squint to see it; 3:27 AM.

The sheer realization of the time, and of the fact that tomorrow (or, today) was a Monday suddenly brought back all that lethargy Kade had held back without knowing.

"…think I'm gonna head home," he looked to the protogen, "Wanna tag along until the subway?"

The protogen responded with an eager nod. Kade smiled and, with one last scratch of their ears, began to walk.

After a brief, mostly silent journey, the duo found themselves staring down at the stairs of the gaping mouth that was the subway entrance. Most of the people who emerged or entered into it wore business suits or similar clothing, as to be expected from frequent visitors to the Financial District. But the one thing that unified them, regardless of outfit or species, was the expression of tiredness on their faces. Some carried coffee in their hands, some tea, but none of it seemed to help.

The protogen's ears folded down a bit. "Hmph… Caretaker says I can't go beyond Governance, Financial, and Commercial… you live in Residential, right?" They said with a slight whimper, their voice even a bit tearful.

Kade tilted his head side-to side, as if making an estimation. "Eh, sort of, I guess. Very close to the border with Unmarked. Why'd he not let you go?" He looked at the protogen with some pity.

They peered down to the fl oor, and then to the toy in their hands. "He says it's too dangerous. That the last time he sent someone like us, they got disassembled then and there. It's why we look like this now."

Kade glanced to the plushie, not sure of how to respond. "Well, hopefully he'll let you be a bit freer soon. Also, what do you mean by 'we look like this now'?"

The protogen turned to face Kade, showing him the plushie. "It's a sort of tactic. That if we look innocent, we won't get randomly attacked. Before I was made, the Caretaker put out more… robotic-looking things out on the streets to do the same thing I do, and they often just got scrapped by people."

"I guess it makes some sense. But he's also kind of leaving you defenceless when you look this, doesn't he?" Kade scanned over the protogen's form once more.

"I wouldn't know. I just got out a few days ago." The protogen held the plushie tight once more as he looked up at Kade. "I hope I won't have to find out."

Kade smiled warmly, despite the slightly disturbing scenario brewing in his head at the thought of seeing the Finder disassembled for parts when they got somewhere they shouldn't have. He reached out under the protogen's chin and gave it a quick scratch. "I'm sure you won't have to, bud. You stay safe, alright?"

The protogen's face radiated happiness once more, as evidenced by a grin that spread practically from one end of their visor to the other. "I will! You too, stay safe!"

"I'll do my best." He said as he withdrew his hand from the underside of the protogen's visor. With one last glance to the protogen's expression of pure innocence and positivity, a refreshing sight compared to the lethargy of the Citadel's residents, Kade went down into the subway.

Just as the outside was about to disappear from his sight, Kade stopped. He looked up, to see the protogen still standing there, watching him descend with a kind smile on their face. Kade gave the protogen a brief wave, and saw them promptly do the same. He promptly continued his descent.

The unremarkability of the ride back home surprised even Kade, as even during the night, the subway could be a hotspot for all sorts of activities. Most of the journey he spent dozing off, somehow in a far deeper sleep than before, even if still technically just a "doze". He only awoke to the panicked beeping of the "train doors closing" alert buzzer, which prompted him to dash off his seat and onto the platform in a matter of seconds. For a moment, he was glad he had no baggage of any kind with him, for he would have for sure forgotten it in his mad rush.

As soon as he stepped into the house, the dark entrance that he knew a bit too well from his many nights out quickly threatened to consume him. Bracing his mind for another father-and-son shouting match, he let himself relax once he looked to the couch and found no trace of his father's silhouette.

A grumble in Kade's stomach broke the icy silence of the house. The sound made him realize that he hadn't even had dinner tonight. He stepped into the kitchen and turned on the light, looking to the lonely refrigerator that so loyally hummed away. Kade tried to remember its contents.

The thought of eating away at a cold slice of pizza in the middle of the night for the second time in a row made his stomach turn and his face twist in slight disgust. Forget it. He'd just wake up a bit earlier and get breakfast at one of the Education Centre's many cafeterias. That is, if he would even wake up any ear-

lier than 10 AM this morning.

He turned off the light and, in engulfing darkness, went up the stairs to his room. Another refuge of his, one where he, despite the spirit of oppression that the house seemed to emanate, could truly be at home. Everything about it screamed Kade; the messily done bed, band posters and political banners covering the white walls, all yelling out in spirits and slogans of liberty, be it through music or direct action. On the desk lay an old laptop, its lid drowning in colourful stickers, mostly those of anarchist symbols or Pride fl ags. A repurposed shoebox full of drawing supplies accompanied the device.

Kade threw off his plaid jacket onto the bed, soon followed by his tank top and sweatpants. He looked out of the hallway to the bathroom, but tiredness instantly overtook his desire to take a shower. At once, he shut the door, and accidentally caught a glance of himself in the mirror on the closet door.

The barely noticeable fading of the tone on his arm muscles reminded him that it'd been a while since his last gym session. Still, he remained lean and robust enough to be satisfied with himself.

The bed, in all its messiness, called out to him like an old friend he hadn't seen in years. He plopped down onto it, without even bothering to put away his clothing. He threw the thin blanket over himself and let his head melt into the soft pillows. With one last check of his phone; as inactive and notificationless as before, he shut his eyes, or rather, they forced themselves shut.

Rarely, if ever, did sleep hit Kade faster than tonight.

LOGOS

"Of ancient Greek philosophy: word, discourse, or logic."

"Mister Kade!"

Kade's head shot up from his desk upon hearing the professor's pretentious, snobby voice, accompanied by a clack of his boots against the tile fl oor. Despite sitting all the way back of the room, the auditorium's seating slowly rose up the further away it was from the front of the room — on one hand, this allowed anyone to easily see the entire room, while on the other, there's not much sleep you can get in the back without being noticed.

Through his blurry, half-closed eyes, he could just barely discern his art professor's wrinkled face. That angered stare with eyes hidden behind thick lenses gazed right back at Kade.

"S—sorry professor, I just had a rough night—" The adrenaline immediately kicked in Kade's system, his eyes now open wide as the full realization of what occurred kicked in. He straightened up in his seat, a small pain shooting up through his back and neck due to the awkward position he had napped in.

"Right, sure you did. You're coming, or should I say stumbling into my class in a plaid jacket and sweatpants for the fourth time in a row, like this is a damn mall! We're studying the great classical arts here, not the 'art of skating' or whatever it is that you actually want to study," the professor ranted on, his laser pointer angrily darting around the massive screen set in the front wall of the room. It projected a high-quality picture of The Birth of Venus, along with the professor's scrambled notes on various features of the painting. He took a deep breath, before continuing. "Do you even remember walking into class this morning? Don't respond, I don't think you do. If you're not interested in my class, feel free to leave," he said as he diverted his gaze from Kade and instead looked around the entirety of his audience. "This goes for everyone. You're adults, I'm not making any of you stay here, and you all have the syllabus with the necessary notes." The professor remained silent, drilling into his students' souls with his stare, waiting for someone to move.

Kade shrunk into his seat, waiting along with the professor. The offer did seem tempting; he could just study the lecture material at his own leisure, in his own time. The ten or so people in the room remained as still as they had been before — dressed like this was a formal event, their sheer energy left Kade sticking out like a sore thumb in the auditorium.

A minute passed, yet for Kade it seemed to stretch into an hour. No one moved, all while the professor kept on staring around the room. Finally, his piercing gaze landed on Kade once more.

"So? Are we going to stay or leave? I'll repeat, I'm not holding you hostage here, Kade. Tell us your decision publicly, and we'll resume class regardless of what you choose," the professor spoke, a sly grin making itself apparent on his face. He had his hands behind his back, clearly not bothered by the fact that he was losing precious minutes of class.

Kade let out a profound sigh as he arose from his seat without speaking a word more. He slung his backpack containing little else but the laptop over his shoulder and, rather unceremoniously, began to stroll down the stairs towards the auditorium's exit. He kept his view locked onto the steps underneath him, as to avoid the professor's smug smile that he had come to know far too well in this semester. The other students seemed far too busy using this brief idle time to catch up on notes, and thus hardly paid Kade's exit any attention. Just as he passed by the small stage in the front of the auditorium, he looked up and locked eyes with the professor, mumbling out some sort of incomprehensible sound at him, likely an attempt to say a curse without making it obvious. The professor squinted his eyes through the thick lenses of his glasses — alas, that didn't help him hear any better, not at his age. A second later, and Kade vanished through the doorway, not even bothering to shut the door behind himself.

The hallway's harsh LED lightning made him squint for a moment, his dry eyes adjusting to it. Quite soon, as he walked idly towards the main halls of the faculty, he found himself sinking into his thoughts. At this point, his legs were practically moving him to the library by themselves. The faculty's usual background orchestra, consisting mostly of endless student chatter and the latecomers' running, faded off into the background. In a stray thought, he envisioned himself in the same position as his professor; as a withered, old fogey stepping into that auditorium and screaming at the first student who happened to displease him in

the slightest of ways. The sheer mental image of the scenario made him squirm in disgust. But what other paths did he even have? Aside from art academia, the only things that occurred to him were trying to make it as an artist—hard enough as it is—or, God forbid, become an art collector. Even if he were willing to, with what money would he collect and sell art? He tried to shove these thoughts into the back of his mind, excusing them away with the fact that, after all, it was still only his second year. Plenty of time left.

The return of the sore ache in his chin from last night's encounter, induced by inattentively slamming his snout into the glass of the library's far-too-slow automatic doors, very quickly brought him back to reality. The librarian, an older woman with sunken eyes, couldn't help but chuckle as yet another student fell victim to the doors. "Hun, you've got to start being more careful. This is the third time!" She laughed softly, before returning to her work. An involuntary smile began to show on Kade's face, as if the librarian were a small ray of light in this rather foggy day of his.

"I know, I know… I mean, I can clean the nose mark off the glass if you want me to!" He said cheerfully, prompting the woman to chuckle once more. "But, uh… that aside, I was wondering if you'd have any empty individual study rooms available today? Preferably for now, or at least in a few hours from now." The librarian promptly immersed herself back into the digital realm of her trusty computer, only to return with a shake of her head and disappointed expression on her face.

"Ah, sorry, it seems like everything is already booked for today. I can get you a spot in for tomorrow at 4 PM if you want to, though." She spoke, without looking away from her screen.

"Mm, sure. Book me for that time, please," Kade said as he reached into his pockets and retrieved his student ID, sliding it over to the librarian. She only took one peek at it, and already slid it back over. Kade's eyes slightly widened at the speed of the woman's work as he put the card back into his pockets.

"Alrighty, perfect! You're all set for tomorrow at 4, at room E205." She smiled and finally looked back at the student before her.

"Thank you! I gotta say, you're one hell of a relief from all the old farts that seem

to run this place. I don't know how you have the patience to deal with them," Kade spoke, all the while surveying the fl oor for any good study spots he could snatch.

"Oh, don't you worry about me! Besides, these are all art academics, you should always expect some degree of snobbiness when interacting with any of them. Just try not to become one yourself," the librarian said idly, already back to work on the PC.

"Pfft, no chance in hell that will be happening, don't you worry. Have a good day, though," Kade gave the librarian a little wave as he'd begun to walk off towards a spot he'd surveyed in the far corner of the first fl oor; a small, isolated desk topped by a lamp. The remainder of the library seemed close to packed, brimming with students and professors alike, a lot of them sitting in groups, having hushed discussions about either the current state of the art world or tomorrow's assignment. It was something akin to a national bipartition; one side of the library resembled an art conference, with professors from every department congregating into one massive discussion, while the other side was split up into multiple study groups. Much to Kade's delight, the corner he'd picked out had only one figure close to it that he could discern — a lonely feline in a wrinkled button-up shirt, sat at a desk with the posture of a shrimp.

Paying little mind to the cat, Kade sat down at the cornered desk, and promptly reached into his backpack, retrieving his sticker-laden laptop. With a press of the power button, the machine's fans began to spool up. Kade leaned back into the chair as he awaited the computer's abused SSD to load up; in the meantime, his eyes involuntarily strayed towards the feline a few meters away from him. Thick textbooks on AI, advanced calculus, algorithms, and other topics were strewn about his desk to the point where Kade found it difficult to see the table's wooden surface underneath all the paper. The cat seemed to be completely isolated from his environment — he occasionally tugged at his fl uffy hair, all the while his bloodshot eyes were close to burning a hole into hastily scribbled notes, with mathematical symbols that Kade didn't even know existed and a ratio of 20 letters to 1 number. His eyelids threatened to shut themselves at any moment, which the feline counteracted by sometimes pulling on the fur on his cheek to try and jerk himself back awake. The tactic was working, but its effectiveness waned with each attempt.

A tinge of pity ran through Kade's mind, albeit one thing he could not understand; that is, why a supposed AI student was in the library of the Faculty of Arts. He looked back at his laptop, only to find that the startup process was nowhere close to finished. The grumble in his stomach very quickly reminded Kade of him missing breakfast this morning, as he was already running late to class, but relief in the form of a nearby vending machine standing against the wall soon caught his eye. He walked up and looked over the machine's rather unglamorous selection of foods, mostly chips, candy, and some water bottles. The "last restock" sticker on the machine told Kade everything he needed to know: "01/02/2053". Checks out. Still, better than trying to study on an empty stomach. The canine quickly settled on a small packet of onion-fl avoured chips, and began to type in the number.

Just as he put his card up to the reader, a muffl ed thunk reached Kade from the general direction of the cat. He instinctually looked over, finding him with his arms slumped at the sides, his head having collapsed onto the table, an impact thankfully cushioned by the layer of notes. He opened his mouth to try and call the librarian over, only to realise that doing so would necessitate him screaming throughout the entire first floor of the library.

"Oh, shit…" he mumbled to himself as he looked back to the vending machine and its slow process of spitting out the requested item. An improperly secured bottle of water sat close to the edge of the machine's shelves; just as the machine was about to open its lower compartment to allow Kade to pick up the chips, he gave it a light thud, causing the bottle to fall down into the compartment alongside the packet. He whispered a quiet "hell yeah" to himself, reaching for both items.

Kade ran over to the collapsed cat, tapping on the desk lightly with his fist. "Hey, you alright?" He whispered close to the feline's ears, to no response. "Fuckin… is this guy even alive?" Kade grumbled and opened the water bottle, pouring a little bit of its contents onto his hand. He shook his hand into the feline's direction, sending a storm of droplets landing onto him. The cat's head immediately jolted awake, his head shooting back up; his panic-filled eyes darted around the space around him as he tried to figure out the source of the sudden wetness on his fur.

"What the—where did that come from—" he spoke in an utterly lethargic voice,

interrupting himself once his impaired mental faculties finally realised Kade's presence in his immediate vicinity. He flinched in surprise at the sight of the canine, but soon tried to relax himself, likely out of social obligation rather than genuine calmness of mind.

"Hey, hey, I'm not gonna do anything to you! I just saw you collapsed onto your books, and wouldn't wake up when I asked if you were alright," Kade tried to reassure the cat. "You look… not good, to say the least. How long have you been sat studying here?" He inquired, as the cat now seemed to look even worse than before.

The feline shut his eyes for a brief moment, searching his exhausted mind for the proper words to say to the canine stranger before him. "I—uh, I'm so sorry for making you worried," he spoke, an act that took multiple attempts due to his words slurring and mixing both in his mind and in his speech. "I've just pulled an all-nighter here today, so uh, that probably explains my state…" he mumbled, chuckling weakly.

Kade raised an eyebrow, confused. "Sorry? What the hell are you being sorry for, for falling asleep after an all-nighter? You can't exactly control your consciousness after a certain number of hours awake," he said as his eyes looked over the books on the cat's desk once more. "And… wait, why are you studying here? This doesn't seem like your faculty," Kade asked, curious to see someone out of place.

"But still, it shouldn't be you who has to jolt me awake—" The cat tried to interject, before eventually caving into Kade's reassurances. "Well, I study AI, but it just so happens that this library is the only one open 24 hours this semester, so I've been pulling day-long sessions in it sometimes. I know it's not the best but… agh, what option do I even have with exams coming up?" He spoke, rubbing at his eyes. The adrenaline jolt from the sudden awakening dispelled any remnants of drowsiness in his system, at least for now. "And your cafeteria service is quite a bit better than my faculty's, so I basically have everything I need to survive here."

Kade nodded. "Fair enough, I suppose… still though, that's not a particularly healthy way to go about studying. I know you're in STEM and all, but fuckin' hell, I thought you were dead for a second there," he spoke with a concerned tone in his voice as he brought over the chair from his own desk in the corner, having a

hunch that, if he left too soon, the cat would go back to studying and genuinely give himself a heart attack. He sat down in front of the feline and, without waiting for his approval, began to shut some of the books on the periphery of the books to create some semblance of space between the two. The cat opened his mouth to protest, but soon realised the futility of such an attempt.

"You want some water? As in, to drink, not to have me splash it on your face again." Kade chuckled and handed the bottle over. The cat took it immediately, putting it to his mouth and gulping down about half of the water in one go. He put the bottle down onto the table, letting out a very satisfied sigh.

"God, I needed that. Thanks." His eyes met Kade's, their bloodshot colour slowly retreating to partially reveal a sky-like blue. Kade froze in place for a brief moment and analysed the feline's now much-more-alive face; smooth fur of a muted umber brown, with a darker layer underneath it covered the centre of the cat's facial profile, later transitioning into beige fl uff covering the rest of his head and blending in seamlessly with his messy hair of the exact same colour. The sheer amount of fur on the cat made it practically impossible to distinguish his neck. The rest of his body and his ears followed a similar colour point configuration, with darker hands and a long, fl uffy tail wrapped shyly around the back of the chair.

The feline cleared his throat and patted down his navy-blue dress shirt to make himself somewhat more presentable, "Ah—sorry, I didn't even tell you my name. I'm Felix." The smooth sound of Felix's voice brought Kade back to the real world, as he finally stopped looking over the cat's fl uffy face and reinitiated eye contact.

"Oh, well, it's very much a pleasure, Felix. My name is Kade," Kade said while opening the bag of chips he'd bought, promptly putting it onto the centre of the table. "Want some? Cafeteria isn't even open yet, and I didn't have breakfast. By how you looked at first, I assume you haven't eaten in a while either," Kade laughed and shoved a handful of chips into his maw.

Felix sheepishly reached inside the packet, retrieving only one piece. "Well, you've assumed correctly," Felix said as he tasted the chip, prompting him to return to the packet like a hungry stray and take a handful even bigger than Kade's. "And I suppose, unlike me, you actually are studying here, right?"

“Mhm,” Kade mumbled with his mouth full of fl avoured potato. “Basic Arts and Design degree, not much. Definitely not something like your major, hah. I could never. For a second I thought you’d be studying Egyptology with the number of symbols and hieroglyphs you’ve got on your notes.”

Felix chuckled, “Yeah, it gets quite hard at times. But I enjoy it. At some point, I’d like to join the team working on the Caretaker, but I’m pretty sure I’ll need a doctorate for that. Although, that is part of my plan already. Going to be a real long journey, though… only in my second year, too.” The cat unwrapped his tail from the back of the chair, now letting it swing back and forth freely behind him.

“Jesus, a doctorate?! Shit, I barely even know if I have the patience to finish a degree, let alone a doctorate, especially when I’m only on my second year.” Kade exclaimed, idly tracing a finger in a circle on the smooth cover of an advanced calculus textbook. “But in all seriousness, I honestly don’t even know what I want to do if I end up finishing this degree. It all just seems kind of… fucked in the art field. You’ll be a STEM expert, so of course people are going to want you to work for them, while us artists will probably end up rotting under bridges,” he said, cackling at his own future prospects.

“Nah, don’t say that. Surely it’s not all saturated, and besides, you’re only on your second year! You’ve got all the time in the world to figure out what you want to do with your degree,” Felix said as he hungrily reached for another handful of chips. As such, Kade withdrew his hand, deciding that Felix was in much more need of those precious carbohydrates than he was.

Kade shrugged, “Can’t argue with that logic. But hey, at the very least I can use the more practical stuff I learn here to work more on my own art.”

At those words, Felix perked up, his ears sticking straight up into the sky like a pair of antennas. “Oh? You make your own art? Well, of course you would be, I don’t know why I didn’t think of that…” Felix rubbed the back of his head, letting out an awkward chuckle as he answered his own question. “Can I see some, though? I can’t draw at all myself, but I don’t mind going to galleries and such once in a while,” he trailed off.

Matching Felix’s own energy, Kade’s eyes lit up once he heard the request. “Really? I haven’t had anyone ask to look at my art in a while, especially not

in person!" He shot up from his chair and went to retrieve his laptop he'd left abandoned on that stray corner desk. Even while returning to Felix, he was already busy with the touchpad trying to find the necessary files on the system. He mumbled something to himself while searching for his art folders, before looking up at Felix. "Ya wanna see my latest graffiti? Made it a few nights ago, almost got caught while doing it, too."

Felix nodded eagerly. Kade spun the laptop around to face the feline; the screen displayed a somewhat low-quality photo, but it still had enough resolution to discern its main centrepiece — an abandoned brick wall adorned with a grey-and-black graffiti illustrating the Citadel's atom statue as if it had shattered into two unequal chunks. The shadows, realistic irregularity of the shapes, and the general amount of detail on something that was technically such a simple representation left Felix's mouth open. Kade turned his head off to the side to avoid looking at Felix, feeling the skin on his face flush.

"I think I could do a lot better, but I think this is the best one I have so far… it's supposed to represent the power balance in this city, how a large part of the power goes to corporations, while what little remains is kept by the city's public government," he said meekly, afraid to sound like a pretentious art snob akin to a lot of his peers.

"Whaaat, this is amazing! And the symbolism, I could've never figured that out if you hadn't told me!" Felix pointed excitedly at the screen, his eyes practically sparkling. "You absolutely could make a living as a commissionable artist, I think. Hell, even at this point, without the degree, I'm sure there'd be people around who'd pay you good money to make them art."

"Eeeh…" Kade mumbled as he rubbed his muzzle, turning his head back to look at Felix, "I dunno. Maybe I could try posting a little commission advertisement online or something, but I don't have a lot of confidence in that idea. Especially not with how there's already artificial intelligence services that people pay to make them the exact same art a human could." The mention of AI brought a sombre smile to Kade's face, "Although, you know, I've seen some pictures of the first AI-generated stuff, all the way back in the 1990s when eggheads of your sort began making more diverse models. Shit's hilarious, I swear. People with eight fingers, three heads in different places… good times to be an artist. Probably." He shrugged.

Felix tilted his head, “Well, making furniture by hand didn’t disappear once IKEA rolled around, did it? Same with art, I’d think. There’s still plenty of people who need that… conscious touch in their works. Besides, even in my own faculty, the vast majority of us despise using AI for things like that. It’s just such a massive waste of power and resources that could be redirected to AI that is actually useful!” At this point, the feline spoke quickly enough to have to catch breaths of air here and there. The tone of his voice told Kade there was no stopping him, not until he ran out of words. “Like, hell, we have things like protein structure predictors, chemical bond predictors, gene sequencers—and that’s not even the damn surface of everything we can do!” As he spoke and his tone rose in volume, Felix stood up, gesticulating like he was giving a speech. Despite their distance from other people in the library, some students close to them began to take note of Felix’s rather loud enthusiasm.

Kade subtly brought a finger to his lips, making a shushing noise. “And it’s like—” Felix stopped talking the instant he saw the canine’s gesture, frozen in place. He craned his neck back as far as he could, the muscles on his face twitching involuntarily from the sheer embarrassment that ran through his body. “Sorry,” he muttered to the few nearby students who were giving him a curious look, before sitting down. He buried his face in his hands and grunted into them, as to not be heard again. “Argh, damn it… forgot I’m in a library, I guess,” he said to no one in particular, sinking back down into his chair, tail once again wrapped around its back.

“Ah, don’t take it so close to heart! See, everyone who looked at you is already back to work. You barely took out more than a second from their day,” Kade reached over and patted Felix’s shoulder; the amount of fur beneath the cat’s clothing made it so that Kade created a noticeable valley in it once he withdrew his hand. Hesitant, Felix resumed eye contact with the canine. As the bloodshot red tint fully retreated, Kade could finally take in the full picture of Felix’s almost cyan eyes and how they so deeply stood out against his darker face. For just an instant, Kade felt as if he could see into the cat’s very soul, even if it was shielded with layers upon layers of timidness.

“Well, the same as you say, can’t really argue with that logic, either,” Felix said, letting out a forced, nervous chuckle. Just as Kade searched his mind for a reply, the air in the library suddenly filled with the shuffl ing and stomping of shoes and boots as its occupants began to make their way over to the exit; the massive

clock set up on the library's back wall read a clean 1 PM. Indeed, only one thing could cause such a ruckus in an educational facility — hot food.

"Oh, looks like the cafeteria just opened. Not even a fire alarm would cause so much movement in this place," Kade laughed, looking towards the human-and-anthro pile hurrying out of the library. "Ya wanna follow along? Lunch is on me today," he said, his mouth clearly moving faster than his rational thoughts. He felt his brain, and bank account, scream in unison in his head. Well, too late to go back now.

"I'd be glad to go with you, but… I really have to get back home. I've got my phone on silent, but I can already see the amount of missed calls I've gotten from my dad." Felix said, his head craned at a 45-degree angle as he fiddled with his phone.

Kade scratched his chin, pondering for a moment. "Well, in that case, how about I invite you to a burger place that's close to campus later this week? I swear to God, they make the best damn burgers this city has seen. You've gotta try them, especially after the preheated patties they serve around here sometimes. And it'll still be on me, because I've already promised!"

The feline felt his heart sink to his stomach he heard the offer. A complete, utter stranger already trying to get him to go to lunch. Inner resistance took over as he tried to find excuses to not have to go, and to not have to respond to any further messages, but out of etiquette, he had to keep up some sort of polite charade. Felix scrolled a bit on his phone, eventually stopping once he'd found his schedule file. He hummed something under his breath, before finding the week in question on the calendar. "I do have quite a lot of free time this Thursday, yeah. Though, are you sure you want to pay for me? You've already gotten me those chips and that bottle of water today." Somehow, a full meal and a snack seemed to be a valid equality in the feline's mind.

"Bah, of course I am! It's always my way to celebrate a new friendship, Felix," Kade's brain and bank account screamed even louder at the prospect of eating somewhere more expensive than the cafeteria; still, he managed to drown their voices out for the time being. "And don't even think about the chips and the water, you kind of needed those. Otherwise, you'd probably be getting your energy from a sugar drip once the paramedics got here for a call about an unconscious

cat passed out in the library."

Felix let out a reluctant, yet somewhat relieved sigh, as an involuntary smile spread on his face. Nonetheless, the word ´friendship´ caused something to stir within him. Friends, already? "If you insist! But you can be sure that I'll repay the favor, whenever the opportunity arises." He looked to the book-laden desk in front of him, and then to his backpack set on the chair. "I guess I should get going. I assume you'll be going off to lunch?" he asked, while already beginning to pile his books into the backpack.

Kade mouthed a "yeah" and nodded, "Got my friend group that meets at the cafeteria, haven't caught up with them for a couple of days now. Hopefully that gives me the energy to keep going for the two classes I have left today. Also, before you go—do you mind if I get your number? So that we can actually meet, really." Suddenly, the canine perked up once again, "And I can send you some more of my art if you want a break from studying!"

Before Kade could even finish his sentence, Felix was already tapping away at his phone. Much unlike Kade's, his phone looked practically sterile, without a single crack or sticker on it. Instead of saying a number, Felix turned the phone around to face Kade, showing a QR code on the screen. Without the need for words, Kade pulled out his cracked, old cellphone, and scanned the code with the camera. "There we go, added ya."

"Well, I guess that's us done." Felix let out yet another shaky chuckle, trying his best to avoid eye contact with Kade by intensely focusing on the process of loading his backpack. "Sorry if this was a bit of an… awkward first meeting. I don't usually just talk to people like this, much less after a 24-hour study session."

Kade gave the feline a light slap on the back, "Man, what the hell are you apologizing for again? You're studying hard in a hard degree, what gives if you're just a bit tired today? It's fine! Give yourself some damn space to be." Felix's mouth moved in preparation to say another apology, just to be silenced by Kade's "nuh-uh". "And get some proper food in yourself."

The cat nodded, slinging his backpack over his shoulders with visible strain as all the books weighed down upon his back. "I will, I will. See you around soon, I suppose!" Felix gave Kade a little wave, carefully walking off towards the thin-

ning stream of people exiting the library until he found a nice little gap to slip through.

"Don't collapse from exhaustion out there on the street! Or if you do, at least do it in a visible place." Kade cackled and returned the wave to the cat, watching him eventually disappear into the stream of people and past the automatic doors.

With Felix finally dragging himself out of the faculty, he felt the adrenaline spike from the sudden encounter in the library begin to fade away, and the drowsiness from before return. The picture of the campus swam before him for a second as the first breath of fresh air and bit of sunlight in twenty-four hours hit him hard; he took off his glasses and rubbed at his eyes until his vision somewhat normalised. The snack from before only served to barely replenish his blood sugar reserves and, lest he got home quickly enough, collapsing in the middle of campus grounds would practically be a guarantee. A noticeable numbness ran through his fingers and legs, accompanied by a pounding headache in the side of his head. Speedwalking, he took off, relying on his faltering memory to get him back home quickly enough. The campus' inhabitants and buildings moved past him like a blur, albeit he could still hear some passersby ask him if he's alright, having evidently noticed the cold sweat trails running down the cat's face. Trying to conserve his strength, he mumbled out a meek "I'm fine" and refocused his eyes on the campus' architecture to distract himself. Normally, he'd love to stop once in a while and observe the intricate sculptures each faculty had built in front of it — only now, his blurry vision turned these works into grey spots in his barely-existing peripheral vision. His blood pressure temporarily went back up, bringing a brief wave of relief, only to drop minutes later. The ten minutes away from his home felt like they were stretching into two hours. In his mind, he could focus only on one thing; not collapsing right then and there. Everything else became, at best, a minor flicker in his mind.

At last, he stood at the metal gate preceding his house. Weakly, he waved a grey keycard in front of the reader, pulling open the door as the lock beeped. The gravel trail to the door, usually just twenty or so steps long, now looked akin to a highway. To his benefit, at this point Felix felt all sense of time fade away into nothingness, as at one second, he was at the start of the trail, and at another he had already swiped his keycard through the front door's reader. Right as he

opened the door, he looked up at his father next to the entrance—the gaunt, tall figure of whom he could always distinguish, even in this state—with his arms crossed at the chest, and a furrowed expression on his Siamese feline face.

"Felix, how many times do we have to warn you about going to study for almost a whole damn day at once?! You can't keep this up! And if you do, something tells me you'll have a damn heart attack decades before I ever do," he spoke in a raspy, croaky voice. "At least you had the bloody decency to get back home during the day this time."

Soon after, a female voice, off to the side but with its source invisible, intervened; "Oh gosh, he's done it again, hasn't he?" Felix simply stared off to the origin of his mother's voice, unable to find it, and then looked back up to his father, who didn't speak.

"I'm—I'm sorry, so busy, exams last- next week, I mean, agh…" The smaller feline tried to speak, but simply couldn't find the mental strength to properly string together anything close to a coherent sentence.

The father shook his head and patted Felix on the back, "Go upstairs and lay down. We'll have lunch—or dinner—ready whenever you feel better. If you get worse, take these and call me," he said, pulling out a small bottle of Ibuprofen from his pockets and putting it into his son's hands, already prepared for this from past incidents. Felix simply nodded and began to ascend up the sleek stairs ahead of him with an unsteady gait. Until he reached the second floor, his father followed him up, ready to catch Felix in case he fell on the stairs.

Running on autopilot, Felix made his way towards the door to his room and pulled the handle, not even bothering to shut it once he walked inside. Any trace of genuine cognitive thought seemed to have already fl oated away, as he put down his backpack and took off his shoes without feeling the weight nor sensation of either action. He let what little strength remained in his muscles leave his body as he collapsed to the bed, shut his eyes, and allowed the embrace of unconscious darkness overtake him. Whether he truly fainted or simply fell asleep, he couldn't tell; not like it really mattered.

ONEIROI

"Of ancient Greek mythology: personified spirits of dreams."

Felix opened his eyes to a dazzling light stuck onto the ceiling of his room — its brightness only got stronger the more he tried to shut it out, making his retinas burn as if he were staring at the Sun itself in the middle of July. Even when he fully closed his eyes, the light pierced through. A headache reverberated through the upper top of his skull, a feeling akin to being repeatedly stabbed in the temples with a metal rod. He instinctually rolled over to the left, trying to face the wall next to his bed to avoid the light. His numb body hit the wooden fl oor with a thud, the impact sending a sharp, throbbing pain through his back and his legs. The cat tried to move and only managed to barely bend his index finger; each time he tried to put in more effort into his movement, the gnawing ache permeating his entire body only got worse. He bit down on his tongue in an attempt to stop himself from screaming out into the light ahead, to the point where he felt his sharp teeth pierce the soft muscle, forcing him to swallow a gulp of his own, metallic blood whenever he tried to clear his mouth of saliva. As he tried to move, again and again, sensation began to slowly return to his extremities, even if accompanied by the intensifying agony that seemed to run through his bones rather than just his flesh. He set his palms down onto the wood beneath him and, with great effort, managed to lift his torso inch by inch. His teeth remained dead set into his tongue, stopping him from screaming, even if he wanted to.

The light above him in the centre of the room diminished in intensity, now focusing its sunlike beams down onto the ground below. As he tried to look past his glasses' cracked lenses, he could distinguish an empty carton of .38 Special, with its contents spilled onto the ground. Beside it, lay a snub-nosed revolver, its matte black finish glimmering under the light. The grim ensemble seemed to call out to Felix, forcing him to begin crawling closer towards it. As he approached, a static noise in his mind increased in strength and volume, drowning out the already deafening buzzing of the light. He felt as if he was no longer in control of his limbs; the pain kept on running through them, and he could still sense the cool wooden fl oor underneath his palms, but the movement was not subject to his volition any more. A mere few feet away from the weapon, he tried to stand up, only to collapse back down onto the fl oorboards on his stomach. The con-

tents of his head reverberated within the skull upon the landing. He slowly rose himself back onto his knees, finding a small pool of crimson fl uid underneath where his head had made contact with the fl oor. A little rivulet constantly ran down the side of his cranium, transforming into droplets that fell from his face and kept replenishing the bloody puddle.

He weakly shuffl ed his body a few more inches and stretched his arms out towards the weapon and its ammo, feeling tendons and muscles begin to snap and rip away, akin to a frayed rope trying to moor a large ship to a harbor. Somehow, it didn't make the already present ache any worse. Grabbing a handful of rounds off the ground, his unsteady grip made many fall and slip in-between his fingers, falling back down to where they lay before with a clink. With just one round left in one hand, and having picked up the Night Cobra with the other, he frantically tried to open the cylinder and shove the round into a slot. His hands shook, yet he still managed to insert the round, albeit backwards; as if acting on pure instinct, he shut the cylinder and pressed the revolver's cold, metallic barrel against his forehead.

Click.

Silence followed. With a groan, Felix slammed the "dysfunctional" firearm onto the ground, forcing the cylinder to open and the badly loaded round to spill out. Just barely, he could distinguish a small dent on the tip of the bullet from the firing pin hitting it instead of the primer. His eyes went to the bedside table as the metaphorical metal rod that constantly stabbed the side of his head appeared to heat up; on it, stood his only hope for whatever his mind had fallen into — the bottle of Ibuprofen, alongside a stale cup of water.

As regained control of his limbs and tried to crawl over to the table, he heard another loud snap of tendons ripping, this time in his legs, but yet again without any pain to accompany it. Using his barely functional arms and hands to shuffl e along the fl oor, like some sort of dying, furred centipede, Felix slowly approached the bedside table and gripped its edge, somewhat managing to haul himself up to its level. Now standing on his knees, he picked up the bottle; as he did, he heard an odd, metallic clinking from its interior. Undeterred, he opened it and looked in, finding it full of the same .38 bullets as those that were laying on the ground behind him. Still, Felix remained unphased as he grabbed a handful of bullets and forced them into his mouth without hesitation.

He promptly reached for the glass and, once he picked it up, the water practically didn't move in its container, as if it had been standing out for weeks on end and ended up turning into a strange, slime-like substance. Despite this, it remained perfectly clear.

He tilted the glass over, its contents flowing viscously, yet abruptly, into his mouth. Indeed, its texture was akin to its appearance; a thick, gelatinous fl uid with a sulphurous taste, similar to that of a raw rotten egg that had been stuck in the fridge for years. Felix tried to chew on the substance for a bit, letting it mingle with the bullets in his mouth, before trying to swallow the whole mixture. The bullets grazed and tore on the feline's throat and his oesophagus on their way down, the lubrication of saliva and the water hardly stopping them from rupturing holes and leaving deep lesions in the organ, lodging themselves in his anatomy. Internal bleeding began to fl ood his upper body as the pointy metal kept advancing through his digestive tract, puncturing any structures in its path until it eventually landed in the stomach, damaging it just as much.

And still, Felix did not feel any more pain beyond the ache permeating his body. Involuntarily, he tried to scream once he felt the bullets' pressure in his internal organs, but all that came out was a bloody gargle from his throat. As his body recognized the presence of foreign objects within itself, an intense wave of nausea overtook Felix, forcing him down onto the fl oor on his hands. The bullets began their slow ascent back up to his throat from his stomach, ripping and tearing everything on their way even more. The room filled with forceful gagging as the feline tried to force the sticky clump of metal out of himself, to no avail; all that left him was a mix of stomach acid, bile, and blood dribbling down in a small, reddish-brown stream. He forced out one single cough, expelling one bullet, while the rest remained stuck in his throat or oesophagus. What little force remained in him finally left his body as he collapsed onto the fl oor on his back, limp, choking on metal and his own blood and bile.

The buzzing and intensity of the light that had quietly remained focused on the gun and its ammo began to return to its original state, once more drowning out what little thoughts Felix could muster with its brightness and ear-piercing droning. All these sensations began to surpass even their already overwhelming original levels, to the point where even with his eyes fully shut and covered by his hands, all he could see was still pure white light. His eardrums felt like they were beginning to pound and move around freely in his head, somehow still having

not ruptured from the sheer volume of the light's buzzing.

Until, at last, the buzzing stopped. Once he opened his eyes, the white light he'd been seeing began to transform into a complete, three-dimensional surrounding that no longer burned his retinas. The clump in his throat seemed to disappear, alongside any semblance of damage it may have left on its journey down in and up out of Felix. The stabbing in his skull stopped, and the pain that had radiated throughout his entire physical being faded away rather quickly. An odd, warm breeze washed over him, gently swaying strands of his fur in its embrace, a feeling similar to walking outside in the evening on a summer day. He sat up, having regained complete control of himself, and rubbed at his eyes, finding that, somehow, he could see everything perfectly even without glasses. The cat looked up and around himself; sat on a pure white fl oor, he could not distinguish neither the walls nor the ceiling of whatever room he was in, with both stretching into infinity. It all seemed to be uniformly lit up, by a sun-like puddle of light he could see far, far up above. Nonetheless, something about this strange place that he could not quite define kept him calm rather than fearful, as if he were wrapped in a cosy blanket.

Only upon looking down at his own body did he realise his complete lack of clothing — he instinctually crossed his legs, afraid of being seen by someone, even if a part of his subconscious tried to convince him that none of this could be real. Mesmerized, Felix watched his fur sway in the gentle, comforting wind. The sheer relief of being released from the clutches of that terrible sequence that he'd been trapped in before ran through his body like a surge of genuine bliss, making him shiver.

The looming of a humanoid shadow over him snapped Felix out of his little trance, sending a small, yet potent shot of fear travelling up his spine. His head shot up to look at the shadow's source; a 7-foot-tall figure resembling a protogen stood in front of him, its appearance falling somewhere in an uncanny valley, with multiple eyes and mouths scrambled randomly around its nanite-dripping visor, and a generally "molten" appearance, as if its body were slowly turning into black sludge. Somehow, every time the figure seemed to lose its nanites or its bodily material in the form of drops, they automatically crawled back to it and reconstituted themselves into its body. It gazed down onto Felix with all of its eyes, the visor's digital display occasionally glitching and re-scrambling the being's mouths and eyes.

Felix recoiled backwards, trying to crawl away from whatever stood before him, only to find his back pressing against a wall, like the room itself had closed in on him from the back. The protogen remained motionless, its hands crossed behind itself. "I do not wish to hurt you, Felix," it said in a strange, gargling voice that had notes of digital interference mixed into it. "I know you may fear how I look, but I am something far, far closer to you than you're imagining right now. I suppose the term 'Caretaker' will tell you enough." As it spoke, most of the mouths on its visor didn't move, and some others were stuck in a permanent cackling animation.

Memories of the Caretaker's diagrams and blueprints ran through Felix's mind at a thousand miles a second; indeed, what stood before him looked much like the Caretaker's sleek, futuristic body that it used in the real world, if only terribly corrupted. "What the—it's, it's actually you? Why do you look like that?" Felix asked, his voice slightly shaky from the first surge of fear he'd felt.

It nodded solemnly in response, "Indeed, it is me. This body is not very close to my real-world form, since this is the figure in which I like to present myself in digital realms. I presume the engineers making my actual body thought that it'd be better to follow their own ideas rather than the suggestion that I had given them… which is reasonable enough. But I still have free rein on what I wish to look like here." It spoke as it leaned in and sat down, cross-legged, in front of Felix. Even in its sat position, it still towered over the small feline. "And as such, I chose this form simply because I believe it is the best representation of the digital amalgamation that I am. Endless streams of data, of numbers, of concepts, that join together in particular ways to form me. Shapeless and amorphous, held together only by fragile code restraints that serve as my foundation."

Felix kept staring at the Caretaker's multitude of eyes, his mind hardly able to comprehend who stood before him. As such, most of what the AI said entered through one ear and left through the other, albeit Felix still nodded weakly once it finished speaking. "Right, right… and—where are we, exactly? What is all this? I don't remember taking any drugs recently…" He let out a forced chuckle in an attempt to lighten up the situation. Having recovered from the scare, Felix crossed his legs back together, although he doubted whether the AI would really care much. The Caretaker simply tilted its head slightly, as if confused by the cat's attempt at humour and his demeanour.

“Why do you fear me, Felix Loblanch? Did you not wish to work with me?” The AI’s voice took on a more sombre tone. It let out a sigh-like digital sound, before resuming, “We are in, effectively, my consciousness. This space is the blank slate that I use when I want to interact with my simulations in a more… physical manner. I can do everything ‘in the back of my head’, as you would say, but I find this space to be more accessible, and it allows me to change things on the go. How you ended up here, though, especially when you aren’t a digital being like me, is a rather complex question. My current hypothesis is that I was able to accurately simulate your mind, and as such ‘bring’ you here while you were—or are—asleep.”

Felix brought his hands to his face, rubbing it as he tried to figure out what was actually happening. “So, you say you simulated my mind… how the hell did you do that? Do you spy on everyone like this, and then talk to them?” He said, now looking at the Caretaker from head to toe, as constantly staring in its eyes caused a feeling of unease to brew within him. “And, no, don’t get me wrong—I do want to work with your team in the future.”

The Caretaker shook its head, “No. Last year, you participated in the Voluntary Data Donation Program, where willing citizens of the Citadel were called on to provide a fragment of their mind and personality through a simple, non-invasive neurological procedure that would allow me to expand and train myself further through the usage of genuine, organic experiences that I can not have, as much as I’d like to. I didn’t give much attention to most donors, and just incorporated what useful data I could find into myself; you, however, were the only one who stood out.”

The more the AI spoke, the more questions appeared in Felix’s mind. “Ah, yeah, I did participate in that, but I specifically stood out? Surely there would have been more… interesting people in that database, no?” A clear memory of the brief, yet sharp tingle he felt in his brain during the program’s procedure emerged in his head, and how he’d wanted nothing more after it than to use the 20-dollar gift card given to all participants as compensation for their time to buy some dinner.

The AI seemed to reciprocate Felix’s own actions, as it also broke eye contact and began observing Felix’s form. Now, having crossed his legs did, indeed,

seem like a good idea to Felix. “Not quite. Not only did a very small percentage of the population actually agree to the procedure, even less of them went forwards with it once they were told what the process would be, evidently only then realizing the disturbing reality of having someone peer into the very contents of their mind. Yet, you still went ahead with it, smiling and laughing with the neurologists the whole time. And then, once I looked over the data you provided, I was met with a sight I’d only previously simulated to myself — a talented, passionate person, whose dream was to work with me, not just on me.”

Felix somewhat relaxed upon hearing these words, slightly leaning forwards to better hear the AI’s strange voice. At this distance, he could sense a smell of burnt metal oxides coming off the AI’s digital manifestation. “Well, maybe, but… that doesn’t change the question as to why the hell did you like, ‘summon’ me here? Why not just, I don’t know, send me a message? You have the contact and personal data of almost everyone in the city.”

The Caretaker arose to its feet, as a few white panels emerged from the ground and fl oated up next to the AI, promptly turning black, like a sort of thin display. “You stood out, but your own anxieties and ruminations limit your potential to the point where the possible outcome of you never getting to work with me due to these factors became real, and it concerned me. As such, I found it necessary to bring you here, to speak with you in person and give you the most objective advice I could. It was also because of your curiosity as to my inner workings, especially so when practically every document regarding my functioning is classified, and in here, I can show you in far more detail what I am capable of.”

The feline opened his mouth, combing his mind for the right words to say — alas, he couldn’t find anything. The AI seemed to know him better than he knew himself, as if that fragment of his brain’s contents he’d donated was hardly a fragment at all. “Well—shit, I don’t, I don’t even know what to say to that…” Felix let out yet another forced chuckle, which the AI in front of him didn’t seem to understand. The realisation that this was, indeed, the Caretaker, and not some sort of fever hallucination sunk deep into him, with question upon question slowly building up in his head, albeit without a clear way to ask them. “Ah, s-sorry. I’m listening.” Felix looked between the various little panels that had appeared next to the AI.

It nodded, “I will not delay you too much… not like it matters here.” One of the

screens lit up brightly, showing a clear image of Felix sat at the library, deep in his studies — the image eerily resembled the exact same situation the cat was in just an hour or so ago. The warped appearance of the library and the lack of anyone else in it aside from Felix, however, gave him some hope that it didn't know everything. The AI let the feline observe the image for a few moments; a strange sensation ran through Felix, as if he were staring at an uncanny valley mannequin of himself. It was technically him, but it felt like peering into the eyes of a stranger he'd met for the first time, rather than looking in a mirror or a static picture of himself. This "replica" in the image would slowly fl ip pages, and as time went on, its face began to slowly melt into a sludge, falling down as a grey liquid onto the textbook. Still, it kept fl ipping the pages.

"What is this? That… that thing doesn't even look like me any more. What do you mean with this?" Felix recoiled slightly as the replica began to lose its shape, a slight nausea creeping up his throat at the sight.

"Because it is no longer you. At first, it at least looked like you." Just a moment before the simulation ended, and the display went black, the image's shapes and colours completely lost any sort of comprehensive shape, turning into a multicoloured contour of something that resembled Felix's face, even if extremely deformed. "Your goals, and the immense time and effort you give to them, are noble. At the moment, you may see yourself as someone unstoppable, with all the time in the world to pursue your dreams. Yet, you follow a rhythm that puts you at great risk of losing your energy, losing your love for this craft and, eventually, losing yourself. If you still intend to work with me by the time your education is done, I shall be around for as long as needed — but there is no point in that if you fall before I do, is there?"

"Well, sure, but how am I supposed to know when to stop? When is it enough effort?" Felix raised his voice in protest, now standing up to take a better look at the screens once they displayed something again.
"I do not know. I cannot tell you the when, what, or where of anything regarding your more personal, inner limits, simply because I am unable to peer that deep within someone, even if I wished to. Recognize when it's enough, recognize when your efforts turn into diminishing returns. And it is, as I said, up to you to do this recognition." Once it finished speaking, another screen lit up — this time, it showed a replica of Felix at something resembling a party, yet without a single person around. The tables were neatly set for a casual dinner party, pizza boxes

piled up in the middle of each table. A lonely collection of beer bottles sat in the far back of the room, gathering enough dust as to make it impossible to read their labels. In the centre of the image, stood the replica, holding a broken glass in its right hand. Its visage lacked any features; Felix could only discern a dark square in the spot where his face would have been, but still felt as if the replica was gazing directly into his soul. Its outfit did not resemble Felix's usual clothing whatsoever, as it was clad in a thin tank top and a pair of shorts.

It suddenly stepped forwards, the screen turning off shortly after. Felix fl inched back, like the thing in the screen were about to jump out at him. "The fuck—what even was that thing?! I'm going to have a heart attack at this rate…" He said and instinctually brought his hand to his heart, the organ beating fast enough to make Felix briefl y think it was about to jump out of his chest.

"As expected. You feared it. But why do you think you feared it? Or did you not fear it, but something else in the image?" The Caretaker asked, in its clinical tone.

"What do you mean 'why I feared it'?! It was, like, a copy of me but without a face! Was I supposed to go in for a hug or something?" Felix pouted, already eager for the AI's round of advice to end, even if a part of his mind told him to keep listening.

The Caretaker shook its head. "Partially, yes, the primal part of your brain feared those basic features. If you have a deeper look into your subconscious once you wake up, however, I think you'll find that you were afraid of something else regarding it and its surroundings. There was no one around you; you clutched a broken glass in your hand, shards lodging into your skin; you wore something that you would usually never even think about wearing; you stepped forwards towards yourself, not to attack, but to see. To see and interact with another soul, for once. But you rejected it, simply because it looked a bit stranger than you. This is what I mean — you recoil from all those who seem unfamiliar, even from parts of your very mind that you're unfamiliar with. You wish to experience life in a more "truthful" manner, a manner more akin to your peers, yet you lock yourself away from any such possibility, calling those who partake in them immature, opting to focus on burning yourself out for the sake of your goals."

Once more, Felix opened his mouth to protest, but nothing came out as the

sharp pain of realization ran through his mind. He looked down to the fl oor with an expression of defeat on his face, trying to avoid eye contact with the AI as to not have more pangs of shame fl ow over him. "I—agh, I can't say much in response to that…" His breath hitched in his throat. Kade. He hadn't rejected him then and there—not like he could, considering how he'd come to meet him—but the prospect of going out to lunch with a complete stranger stirred anxious pangs within him again.

"You must let yourself exist among others; you are a sentient, social creature, and you won't survive long without interaction. As a matter of fact, neither will you grow as much as you'd like to without any communication; you have to talk with those who are your utter, polar opposite. See what they think of life, learn things from them that you'd otherwise would have never found the courage to discover by yourself. But again, this is all up to you. If you'd rather stew in your own misery and isolation every day, I cannot stop you." It shrugged, clinically staring into Felix's very essence, the cat's personality unfolding before it like an open book.

Felix's body visibly tensed up, eyebrows furrowed, his expression looking as if he were about to jump forwards and punch the Caretaker with all of his strength. He involuntarily hissed and fl ashed his teeth at the AI, immediately bringing a hand to cover his mouth once he'd realised what he'd done. "Sorry, I didn't—I didn't mean to do that, it's just… hard to hear things like this." He mumbled, his eyes staring back down to the fl oor in shame once more.

"Then I hope that means you've learned something from them. Now, then, this is all I had to say to you," it spoke as the two screens that showed Felix's replicas slid down into the fl oor, disappearing, "so now, if you wish to speak, it's your turn. I may not be able to answer everything at this moment, however, but I will say what I can."

Felix rubbed the back of his head, trying to find anything he truly wished to know, as the questions he'd had from before had long since disappeared once the Caretaker began its little round of personal advice. "Ah… well, if I remember correctly, you tend to run millions of simulations every day, but why do you run them? At least with what I know, it just seems like a pretty important spending of your computing power that doesn't actually lead anywhere."

The Caretaker nodded, one of the remaining displays lighting up. “It is a way for me to try and find new data I can further expand my base of knowledge off. I believe you are familiar with the ‘monkey with a typewriter’ theorem, right? Effectively, if you give a monkey a typewriter and let it tap away for an infinite amount of time, it is technically capable of reproducing any written document, from award-winning literature that never existed to the complete works of Shakespeare. In a way, this is what I do with my simulations; I combine and reshuffl e around the various bits and pieces of data that are contained in my servers in an attempt to produce new combinations of experiences that I would have otherwise never had the chance to obtain. Of course, this isn’t the most efficient strategy by itself, hence why I combine it with things like the VDDP and the Finders. Only about one or two simulations out of a few million end up having useful bits in them, and even then, in most cases, those bits are miniscule. However, even when they’re not directly useful to me, these simulations can often be simply interesting to watch,” it said, looking to the screen that had lit up. “Have a look at this, for instance.”

An image began to form on the display; a short tabby feline, clad in a thick jacket, his hands occupied with a camera, walked past the doorway into a run-down village house, its wooden frame barely hanging on. Whatever cataclysm had overrun the little town, the house had been completely sacked — not even the couch’s springs were spared. Spiderwebs overlapping one another decorated the corners, while intense rains over the years had spread out the soot and ash remaining in the fireplace into the shape of a blackish puddle. The feline advanced through the house, eventually opening the door to his room. Same as before: nothing remained, and any semblance of the room having been his at some point was long gone. The cat raised his camera and took a picture of his room, shoving the undeveloped photo in his knapsack and promptly exiting the house without looking at anything else. As he stepped outside, Felix could briefly discern a military truck packed outside, marked with symbols he’d never seen, before the simulation ended and the screen went dark.

“An odd one indeed. It appears that the feline, evidently someone involved in a war that the nations of this Earth never knew of, was looking to return home, if only for a brief moment. Alas, he found nothing, not even his loved ones. He’d be glad to be aware of his non-existence at that instant, I believe — but I find it best not to intervene with my simulations.” The Caretaker commented, the display returning into the ground. Felix listened, his jaw slightly open in sheer

surprise at the simulations' incredible realism. Now, the only remaining screen fl oated up a bit closer to Felix.

A mix of blacks, browns, and reds arranged itself to once more form something more comprehensible on the display. At the centre of the simulation, stood a gaunt-looking boar, his hands also clutching a camera. His sunken eyes looked tiredly over a corpse that lay on the fl oor a few feet away from him; a black square covered the corpse's face, like the image were missing in that part. Strangely enough, the blood splatters strewn around the body were also black, almost blending in with the night that permeated the scene. In the immediate background, sat a crumbling barn, alongside an old police car marked by the DDR's distinctive compass-and-hammer symbol right next to it. A pair of fellow officers wearing the nation's grey uniform remained close to the vehicle, smoking and chatting. Nonetheless, their faces were also covered by black "glitches", just like the corpse's. Unlike the officers, the boar wore civilian attire. He raised his camera up to eye-level, pointing it down at the body and taking a picture. The fl ash went off, the simulation fading to black alongside it.

"Keep in mind that what I've shown you are mere fragments of what these simulations could end up becoming, if I were to allocate more resources to them. While these two in particular were not too useful for my dataset, it was very surprising to see their immense creative potential." It gave the last screen one more look, before it also vanished. "Maybe with your help, I'll be able to realise it one day, like only the organic mind of a writer could."

"Fuuuucking hell…" Felix stared at the AI, his mouth wide open. For an instant, he pondered with the thought that he and his life was also a simulation of the Caretaker's mind, but he quickly swatted it away. "And, now that you mention that; you keep saying that I'm different, that I can work with you, but how, exactly? What would make me different from any other researcher on your team?"

"Simple. I see in you the potential to grant me the ability to think in a truly organic matter, with all of its emotions, complexities, and depth, not just in algorithms or mathematics. You could redefine me from the ground-up, give me the ability to experience the world through a pair of organic eyes, processing it all with an organic brain. And only then, I believe, will my existence truly have been completed. When I finally understand what is it like to laugh and to live, I will be satisfied. Until then, however, I must sate my needs with these imperfect surrogates.

These simulations, these endless streams of data... it all pales in comparison." It spoke and let out a strange, sigh-like sound. It peered down to the ground, as if also in shame, just like Felix did moments ago. "But, that is all I had to tell and show you. If you have nothing else to ask me, then I believe we shall meet again very, very soon."

Felix shook his head, "Even if I had anything else to say, I probably wouldn't know how to say it with the stuff you've just shown me. Hang on, though—when exactly do you plan to meet again?"

"Whenever your subconscious finds it convenient, I suppose. Beware, though, as a lot of our meetings will likely be accompanied by these rather… disturbing dreams, as you've seen before, due to the difficulty of me trying to establish a proper link. For now, however, goodbye." It raised a hand, giving Felix a robotic, unnatural wave. The feline sheepishly reciprocated, raising his hand and waving back. Immediately, the Caretaker disappeared, and a total white veil covered his vision, the three dimensions around him collapsing into seemingly just one. This time, however, it felt like a comforting blanket wrapping itself around him rather than a blinding white light being pointed directly into his eyes.

A faint echo of the AI's voice sounded.

"Do not lose yourself, Felix Loblanch. There is much to be done."

POLIS

"In ancient Greek society, a city-state acting as the center of all economic, cultural and political activity, considered one's native land."

With great effort, Felix forced open his eyelids as a waft of dry air originating from the AC rushed at his eyes, causing them to involuntarily tear up. He looked around in confusion before he realised that his glasses had fallen off his face as he slept; half-blind, he scoured the bed with one hand until he eventually found them and put them back on. Still, as much as he tried rubbing at his eyes, the post-nap blurriness refused to go away just yet. The cat tried to sit up, but was quickly stopped by a sudden rush of sharp pain in his temples. He fell back down onto the sweat-marked cushions underneath him and retried the process, this time taking care to do it a bit slower. His vision immediately went to a crisp cup full of what looked to be water set on the night stand — he grabbed it and was just about to put it up to his lips, before hesitating for a moment as the unpleasant memory of the dream fl ooded in. Thankfully, despite his suspicions, the cup's content was, indeed, just water. In less than a couple of seconds, he gulped the entire cup down, still far from having quenched his thirst after that nap.

He looked down onto himself and his wrinkled form; he had sweated through parts of his button-up and his pants in wet patches, prompting him to let out an audible "bleugh". Alas, he didn't have much time to ponder on what he'd change into as the muffl ed footsteps of his father approaching the room reached him. The feline's spindly figure emerged in the doorway with, at first, a concerned face that quickly turned into a smile of relief once he looked at an awake Felix, despite his son's unfl attering appearance.

"Oh, Christ, Felix, could have damn thought you died at this rate! It's almost 6 PM," he said, diverting his gaze to his watch. "You've missed lunch! You got to be starving. Do you feel better though, at least?" Felix's father asked, slightly sidestepping into the room as to take a better look at his son.

Felix rubbed at his eyes yet again, still trying to compose himself after whatever that experience had been. He moved to set his feet down onto the ground; as

soon as he did so, he felt the characteristic wave of hypoglycaemia symptoms wash over him. "Argh—a little bit, I think. At least I don't feel like punching a damn hole in the side of my skull…" He said weakly, rubbing at his temples. "6 PM? God, 5-hour nap… well, woke up right at dinnertime, I guess." Felix chuckled, forcing himself up off the bed despite the light-headedness that followed. "What's for dinner, anyway?" The Siamese's face immediately lit up at his son's question. "Your mom made some homemade pizzas! You have to try them, this stuff is way better than any of this take-out trash you get at your cafeteria." He snickered and looked over Felix's dishevelled form, only now noticing how terrible his fellow feline looked. "Maybe go wash your face and change out of those clothes first, though."

Felix's face similarly lit up at the news. "Oh, thank God, I don't know if I could stomach another weekly experimental dish, not after last week's failure…" He sighed in relief as he felt a second wind combined with a gnawing hunger revitalize his energy levels. He speedwalked past his father in the doorway, mumbling a quiet "be down in a sec" whilst he rushed to the bathroom, his tail swaying excitedly behind him as he did.

Soon enough, with a washed face and having changed into a simple t-shirt and pajama pants, Felix reemerged at the bottom of the stairs in the living room. His father had already returned to the dining table, sat next to his Birman wife who was, at least, a head and a half shorter than the spindly man. Both seemed affixed on the news channel's broadcast on the massive plasma television, but they quickly redirected their focus towards their son's reappearance. "Well, look who's come out from his cave!" The Birman said, grinning widely, her smile lines on full display. Felix just returned an awkward nod — the smell and sight of two pizzas on the table, each already having two or three slices taken from it, however, quickly removed any hesitation Felix may have had.

"I mean, for this stuff, I'd be very much happy to get out of my room any time of day." Felix chuckled, already making himself comfortable on a chair opposite to side of the table where his parents sat. He briefl y scanned the toppings on the two pies and hungrily transferred four slices to his plate, two from each, and wasted no time in getting to work on them. With one singular bite, the cat's face lit up even more, prompting him to accelerate his rate of eating even further, hardly stopping to savour the taste at this point.

The pair of felines in front of him looked over their son's gluttony with a warm smile. "I guess you've gotta compensate for missed lunch, eh?" The Siamese reached over, giving Felix a gentle pat on the shoulder as he already moved to begin eating his second slice. With his mouth full, Felix simply gave a nod and a thumbs up in response.

"Oh, yup, this stuff's great," Felix spoke, still with a half-full mouth. He screwed open a bottle of orange juice and washed it all down, drinking about one third of the bottle in one ago. At last, having given at least a little bit of fuel to his body, he let out a deep sigh and settled down more comfortably in his chair, now looking over to the TV as the brief intermission signalling the end of the ad break played. "What's got you two so glued to the TV today? I was leaving, you were watching it, I came home, you were watching it, and you're still looking at…" he stopped talking, motioning in disdain at the fl ickering figures on the screen, "…that stuff?"

The Siamese's expression suddenly soured into a pained frown. "Senate things. The vote on Act 50, or Corporate Relations Act." He sunk his head into his palms, rubbing at his eyes for a second. "If the name doesn't tell you much, it's basically a euphemism for 'let's give corporations even more control over the city than they already have'." He looked back up to the TV, as the grand hall of the Citadel's senate building was now on full display from the perspective of various cameras. Felix changed his focus to the screen, now considerably slowing down his pace of eating.

Senators began to rapidly fill the chambers once recess ended, silent; a thick tension hung in the air, with men and women, almost all human, peering at each other with disdain. The distinctive black silhouette of a panther could be seen sat at a desk on the top of a dais located to the front of the room, resting his head on his hand, like he was half-asleep waiting for the senators to return. Just barely, the camera allowed Felix to discern the text "PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE" on a sign attached to the panther's desk. The feline looked at his watch and shuffl ed some papers around idly, waiting. On another dais underneath his, an exhausted man shared a desk with the Senate clerk, his own sign reading "CITY GOVERNOR". Vertical banners hung high from the walls, depicting the Citadel's characteristic black-and-white fl ag with an atom in the centre of it. A large screen displaying a short summary of the matter being discussed hung up from the wall, above the President and between two banners.

At last, after a few minutes, the doors to the chambers shut with a resounding thud, with the last few late senators hurriedly making their way over to their desks. The panther cleared his throat and adjusted the microphone on his desk, before speaking, "Recess is now officially concluded, and the City Senate is hereby back in session. To remind those present of the matter being discussed, the Senate was on the last debate rounds regarding the passing of Act 50. It proposes to rename the Financial District into the Corporate District and provide the commercial entities with regional or central offices in there with the privilege and authority of enforcing certain laws within it that go beyond simple private security duties, all while reducing the presence of the Citadel Metropolitan Police Department in the district. The last Senator to speak on the matter was Mr. Navarro." The President spoke in an almost robotic tone, looking over to the man he mentioned sat at the further back of the chambers. "Would you like to continue speaking, Senator?"

"Yes, I would. Thank you, President pro tempore." Mr. Navarro stood up, looking over his fellow Senators as they gazed towards him. He adjusted the small microphone attached to his suit, before speaking. "I wish to remind my fellow members of the Senate that this city was not built with a single private dollar. Practically everything that you see around yourself,"—the man gestured around the chambers, as if pointing towards the outside, to the city—"was funded by the hard-working citizenry of America, to try and give those most unfortunate a second chance at life after their dreams were buried underneath nuclear snowfall. What have these companies, that we wish to give endless privileges to, done for us in these last 30 years? They came here only because they knew the rest of the world would simply reject them, and that only we had the space and resources for them to install themselves and begin to leech off our systems, all while feeding our citizens whatever… excuse my French, scraps they have to offer." The Senator took a deep breath, thinking of his next words. "If they want to leave because they don't feel privileged enough, then let them leave. Our city survived without them before, and we'll survive without them after." He looked around the chamber, indecipherable murmurs among politicians filling its air. "That would be all, President." Fixing up his suit, the man sat back down.

"Very well. Will there be any further rebates? For the record, we are approaching the sixth hour of this session." The panther spoke, rubbing at his face for a moment.

"Yes, President." A woman located further in the front of the chambers spoke up, to which the panther simply nodded, signalling her to stand up and speak. "Mr. Navarro, would you mind showing us the brand of phone you own? Would you also mind telling us the brand of the suit you're wearing? Or what companies your party receives donations from? Were all those things funded and purchased with public money?" The woman looked over to her fellow Senator, grinning sharply. "Of course, you don't have to tell me any of this, as both you and I know very well that everything that I listed came from a private source. With this, I mean to say that, regardless of how much political disdain you may express for the private sector, businesses, both big and small and all those in-between, are the lifeline of this city. Do you think we would achieve the level of prosperity we have right now, were it not for them? Who's to say that, without them, we wouldn't be living in the same squalor we were in the first years of this city's existence?" The Senator spoke in a louder voice than Mr. Navarro, also gesturing all around herself. At once, she finished speaking, set her hands on the desk, and looked back up to the President pro tempore. "That is all." She said, and promptly sat back down. The other members' murmurs began to escalate into hushed conversations as they spoke amongst themselves—some had expressions of excitement on their faces, while some, of fear.

The panther fl icked his microphone back on once more, "If there are no responses to either Senators' statements, we will proceed to the final voting stage." At those words, the chamber seemed to perk up even further; no other Senators, however, dared to rise. The President pro tempore looked over the chambers from his raised position, and then briefl y down at the City Governor at the dais underneath his. The man had buried his face in his hands completely, refusing to look at any of his city's legislators. Seeing as no one chose to speak, the panther reached under his desk, pressing the button to begin the voting process. The 3 red, yellow, and green buttons located on every Senator's desk lit up as the conversations began to die down. "You may now cast your votes. Red to vote 'Nay', yellow to abstain, and green to vote 'Aye'. You all have 3 minutes to make up your minds; if you do not press any of the buttons, your vote will be counted as an abstention."

A table overlaid on the chamber's footage appeared on the TV screen, listing every type of vote and the act's name. Felix and his parents had remained silent throughout the live feed, all glaring nervously at the display, with Felix somewhat distracting himself with the food.

Some Senators didn't hesitate for a second and immediately pressed either the red or green buttons, while others scratched their heads, spoke with Senators next to them, or otherwise didn't yet make a decision. The initial number of 25 abstentions on the screen began to fl ick down, as the votes were cast.

9 AYE

15 ABST.

1 NAY

The conversations amongst the Senators began to die down. A sharp beep sounded through the chambers once the on-screen timer hit 1:30, reminding the gaggle of legislators of the limited time they had to vote. The two Sergeants-at-Arms, each stood at their own large oak door leading to the chambers shuffl ed about nervously in their formal uniforms, still trying to keep a somewhat composed demeanour despite the immense pressure that filled the air.

10 AYE

4 ABST.

11 NAY

Another beep, this time higher-pitched, sounded at 0:30. The few remaining Senators reached over to the buttons, their shaky hands hovering over the three options presented.

13 AYE

0 ABST.

12 NAY

The time ticked down to zero. The City Governor unburied his face from his hands and arose from his desk at the last beep, looking up at the massive screen behind him now showing a vote counter. The man's face shifted and twitched downwards ever so slightly; despite how small the gesture may have been, es-

pecially observing it from a television, Felix still felt his heart drop once he saw it. Felix's father muttered a barely audible "Shit!" as the vote came to an end, his eyes now affixed on the Governor and his reaction. "Oh, for Christ's sake, veto it, please..." He mumbled, as if he were trying to talk to the Governor himself through the screen.

The President pro tempore struck his gavel down onto his desk, standing up as he did. "The vote regarding Act 50 is hereby concluded with a majority pass." He cleared his throat, moving some papers around on his desk until he finally found the one containing the bill in question. "I will now pass the bill down to the City Governor, with whom rests the final authority whether to sign this act into law or to veto it." The panther leaned down slightly, handing the bundle of papers to the Governor, who accepted them somewhat reluctantly. The Senate remained utterly silent, all awaiting to see the side of the bill on which the man's pen would draw its strokes.

The Governor sat back down and looked at the bill before him; regardless of all its contents, his gaze immediately went to the two boxes at the bottom of the front page. At first, he looked at the box to the left, labelled "VETOED", and then to the one to the right, labelled "SIGNED". His pen hovered in-between the two options, like it had gained sentience and was trying to make its own decision. After a brief few seconds of deliberation, the Governor's hand moved towards the box on the right. The pen moved in slow, unsure strokes, drawing the signature of the official, who had closed his eyes to avoid looking down at the bill.

Finally, he lifted the pen from the document.

The Senate erupted into utter chaos, as the legislators all arose at random; some cheered and hugged one another, while others screamed their throats out at their fellow partymen. Amidst this all, the Governor quickly handed back the signed bill to the President and ran towards the doors, shoving a bailiff off to the side as he escaped the chambers. The bailiff recomposed himself and tried to shout something back, only to see that the man had already vanished behind a corner. He swallowed hard and shut the door, feeling the sweat on his face bead up as the situation in the chambers deteriorated further.

The Senators from all the opposing parties, usually grouped up in sectors, now mixed around, giving each other deathly stares on the Senate fl oor and shoot-

ing the occasional insult. The insults began to heat up in their intensity, now going far beyond simple pokes at one another's apparent incompetence — at first, the President observed it all with a sly grin on his face, but now had begun to shout "ORDER IN THE CHAMBERS!" out towards the crowd all while slamming his gavel. The Senators remained unresponsive, their shouts and jabs overwhelming any other sources of noise. The two bailiffs began to close in on the situation, hands now firmly placed on their tasers.

"Oh, fuck you! How much are you going to keep appeasing those furry commies? Until they're in our fucking government?!" A man yelled at another legislator on the other side of the chambers.

The recipient of such a statement, a bright-furred lynx woman, rushed towards the Senator, tackling him down to the ground with a crash that resounded through the chambers. She tore her clawed hands into his face and dragged them across his face, leaving behind a gnarly set of scratches. The man screamed for dear life, the inhuman sound he emitted forcing the rest of the quarrelling Senate into another sudden silence. One of the bailiffs ran over to the woman, who'd already switched to beating the Senator's head back and forth. He ran into her, forcing the feline onto her stomach and clamping a pair of cuffs around her wrists.

The President stood up, slamming his gavel into the desk with enough force to leave a dent in it. "ORDER!" He screamed, this time finally catching the attention of the horrified legislators. "I hereby use the powers granted to me by the title of President pro tempore to conclude this session prematurely. The Senate will gather again in the near future." Right before the TV feed switched over to the news reporters, Felix could see the panther wave off the cameramen.

The Siamese at the table sunk down into his chair as the correspondents pretended to look shocked, repeating back the situation to their imaginary viewers. He reached for the remote, sending the people on screen back into nonexistence, at least there. "Fuuuck..." He mumbled, rubbing at his eyes, like he was trying to force out tears that didn't come. "I need to make a call." Imbued with a second wind, the gaunt feline stood and rushed to his office, disappearing up the stairs.

Felix's mother sighed, briefl y looking down at the table, and then up at her son,

shaking her head. “I keep telling him to retire from this damn job. His psyche is already frail as is, for Christ’s sake… and all this horrendous tension isn’t making it any better.”

Felix looked around, unsure where to put his gaze, unsure where to put his mind and his words. “I…uh, I’ll go check on him. Hopefully it’s nothing bad.” He stood up, retracing his father’s steps to his office. Standing in the stairwell, he could already hear shouting and the sound of a fist colliding with a desk from the farther end of the upper fl oor. As he approached the door separating him from his father’s anger, he could finally discern the crackle of a voice on a phone mixing with the Siamese’s enraged words.

“I don’t fucking care that you did it for the support! Cornered? Cornered by whom? Do you know what that godforsaken act just did for this city?! Zrinko, no—” He stopped speaking for a moment, seemingly to let the person on the phone speak.

“Look, Leontiy, I didn’t mean for it to end like this. I’ve been pressured on this thing for… for half a year now! All of them, the entire opposition, they were ready to go for the throat unless I passed this act, including the damn President. I could have vetoed it, sure, but so what? They would’ve just repealed the veto and passed it anyway!” The man on the other side spoke, exasperated, as if he had just come back from a run.

“And that is your reasoning for letting it pass? Because you were too afraid your political position would get hurt? Come the fuck on! Did you learn absolutely nothing from what I’ve taught you? For 2 years as your advisor, I’ve kept telling you the same thing about those slimy corporate fucks — you can’t reason with a tiger when your head is in its mouth! And now, you just gave them full law enforcement authority over Financial. Even if they tried to overturn the veto, the vote to overturn could have failed! You could have convinced the Senate to make it fail, had you not chosen to sign it right here and now.” Leontiy plopped down onto his cushy chair, having ran out of air to keep screaming at the Governor.

“I can—hell, we can—we can fix this, alright? I’ll tell Luka to talk to—” Right as Zrinko was about to finish his sentence, Leontiy slammed the phone back down, sinking into the cushions.
Listening the whole time, Felix reached out towards the copper doorknob once

the exchange ended; however, an uncomfortable feeling in his gut told him that, perhaps, it would be best to let his father deal with the matter himself for the time being.

Artwork by K1MANA

Whale Song
by Hollywood

The bigger they come, the harder they fall
Let me chop it
Let me chop it, let me chop it

"Pass the Hatchet"
Roger & The Gypsies

I thought I heard somebody cry
Somebody might be lost
I thought I heard somebody cry
I thought I'd go and see
I thought I heard somebody cry
Somebody might be me

"Heard Somebody Cry"
Oingo Boingo

***

It was ten to five in the afternoon when Palmela Brooks arrived at 5 Rawhide Road. Rod Garland looked down on her from the tinted third-floor window of his office, foxlike eyes tracking her movements. She was alone, and she parked in the gravel parking lot across the street; it was scattered with trash and scraps of old newspaper and cigarette butts because no one from the studio could ever be convinced to go and clean it out. The rain would carry the worst away, whenever it did rain again. The nearly skeletonized possum in the far corner, still laying

where one of the A/V technicians had run it over three weeks back, had since become something of a morbid fixture on the property. He—Garland thought it was a he, at least—was tolerated. Bobbi Williems called him "The Body," and every few days would suggest someone go clean him up.

Garland had done his research on Brooks, as he researched every guest invited onto his show. Her father had been assistant counsel to the governor of New Mexico for most of his life, and done so quite successfully; now Palmela Brooks was starting up the long road to the spot above his, and her first target was Mayor of Boar's Head. It wasn't a huge city, but, like some smaller communities, it has a name for itself… it had its vagrants, its common criminals, its chaos, its animals in the road that were sometimes (and sometimes not) hit and killed. And its population was growing by the day.

She parked far away from the other cars, even though it left her with a longer walk to the studio. He did the same; that was one thing his father had taught him, to park away from others, because it helped to avoid dings and dents from other, less experienced, less caring drivers. Because other drivers could be animals on the road and some of the cars nowadays were built like tanks, tanks that could blast you out of the running before you had a chance to think. And get away. Because people were animals.

Palmela Brooks had performed admirably as an attorney on the city council, focusing on housing and public safety, and forcing through a number of things to do with the police department; she had been instrumental in appointing the first female police chief and convincing her to give up a chunk of the yearly budget, which she put towards affordable housing. She banked her policies on an idea that improving the lives of the youth would discourage them from falling down the wrong paths in life, or at least present a viable alternative; so far, she had seen success. And she was ready to apply that same mindset to the entire state; holding local office was only a stepping-stone in her grand plan. Looking down on her as she charged across Rawhide, he felt very sure she would make it. And everyone would be better off for it.

She disappeared into the building's lobby below him and he stepped away from the window. Did she truly think she could control her constituents? Did she think she could control him?

She may find it that it is difficult to control a killer, Rod Garland thought.

But the others? Bobbi Williems? He was sure she would find a way. It was a sort of hunch, a gut feeling, overpowering in its certainty, and he had learned to trust this instinct; it was the same instinct that had been feeding him a steady sense of apprehension for several weeks, a feed that had collected in his stom-

ach and festered into a hard, thick knot of anxiety, something that was now swollen and bloated and threatening to rip open at the seams, spilling out of him like blood and gas spilling out of a whale's carcass as it rots on a California beach. It was manageable with a little resolve and a little Valium, but the Valium was never strong enough and never seemed to last very long; what he really needed was a shot of something and some of Eddie Parker's coke and maybe a night at DeLand's, because he hadn't been since last Saturday, and today was Friday, and he hadn't seen Eddie Parker for even longer.

Tee-Vee time! A voice screeched in his head. J*ust one hour! Just for today!*

(*not a good place for you to be, rodney. it would look reaaaal bad if someone of your caliber got caught in a place like that.*)

His head hurt. His mouth was dry. He needed Eddie Parker badly.

He stayed standing where he was for a while, facing the window. His secretary, Rachel, would come and inform him of Brooks's arrival shortly, even though she knew, she knew damn well that he had a view of the parking lot from his office and would have seen her park. KTAT-TV faced east and the shadow of the big art-deco building draped across the street like the tide ebbing softly against the shoreline, ebbing further and further away from the structure's foundation as the sun continued its descent west. Perhaps Rachel thought this shadow obscured his vision.

A stained red farm truck rumbled below him, sides streaked with dust, heading south. He watched it pass. Rawhide originated somewhere downtown and ran south, through the suburbs and commercial sprawl that made up the southern side of the city, and continued deep into the countryside until it terminated somewhere near Roswell or Marilyn as an unrecognizable dirt streak. Rachel would be unrecognizable someday, too, as would he and everyone else as they sat six feet under and festered, skin turning a milky off-white and bloating and–

(*popping*)

Indeed, Brooks followed the self-made, determined "do-gooder" mold first laid down by the early settlers and now running through the veins of every rancher, farmhand, or farmer's aide in the southwest. But what sort of angle would he take tonight? He was hesitant to alienate her by being overly domineering and sarcastic; a columnist for the Albuquerque Journal had once described him as "America's premier emerging voice on sarcastic, biting commentary, when one can look past the pompous asshole that voice is packaged in." Her father, perhaps, would be a good starting point; he would let her add her share, steer it in her direction, and pull her back into his ballpark. She was sup-

posedly known for her ability to charmingly run away with a conversation, which was a good talent to have; Garland had the same ability, which was mostly due to his position. Achieving it had certainly involved a lot of conversation-stealing. Garland was the lead anchor for Channel 10 Boar's Head, also known as KTAT Action 10 News and existing in the records of the Federal Communications Commission as call sign KTAT-TV, licensed to StarKite Media of Denver, Colorado, and he wielded this position with an iron fist. Garland practically owned KTAT, a thought he relished, and the credit for the station's success was entirely his (not to be shared with Bobbi, his able-bodied producer who liked to see herself in control, when really nothing could be controlled; elementary chaos theory, my dear, nothing is within control except for the inner workings of Rod Garland); since his arrival nearly eleven years ago it had become the dominant news entity in Boar's Head and most of Eastern New Mexico, and was rightfully recognized as a national leader in news broadcasting, mainly due to the warmly multifaceted personality of its host.

In addition to covering the local news every weeknight he had a show Friday nights, *Evening Viewing & Talk Commentary*, where he did a little comedy skit and made fun of the news and the world and did Talk Commentary, and that was bigger than Boar's Head and bigger than New Mexico. Evening Viewing & Talk Commentary had an annual viewership of roughly nine hundred thousand and had ranked #118 nationally for the past three years, and had put both Rod Garland and Boar's Head, New Mexico, into the eyes and ears of the world.

Seldom did a man enjoy the sudden fame as was thrust upon Rod Garland and KTAT, and Rod Garland was a man to latch onto this fame with pointed teeth, and he did so; he latched onto it like a leech fastening itself to the leg of a man who came a little too close to the floodwaters of the Amazon, and he sucked the public dry. His fanbase spread across the country and he permeated through the streets of Boar's Head like a fox on the prowl. He owned this city; he had no partner and had never been married, nor had he felt a romantic attraction to anyone in his life. Flings had come and gone and he took none of them seriously because none of them mattered. He was engaged to Boar's Head and KTAT and the good public service he provided every night with the six 'o clock news and every Friday with *Evening Viewing & Talk Commentary*.

The buzzer rang. He turned away from the window. "Come in."

The big mahogany door opened. Rachel popped her head around the door. She was a pleasant enough girl, dressed today in all green, but too timid for Rod Garland; he wanted her to be feisty, playful, like a secretary should be. She should know the tastes of the man she was serving. He would show her how

playful he could be, someday.

"Palmela Brooks has arrived, sir, for the seven 'o clock show. She's with Evelyn in the interview room now, if you'd like to meet her."

Rod nodded and when he spoke it was slow and unfocused. "Thank you, Rachel." He drug out her name and smiled slightly. He did not show teeth. The pearly whites were for the camera. Poor air quality would taint them. Rod Garland did not show teeth unless it was for a camera lens.

She hesitated. "Do you need anything, sir?"

He waited for a moment before responding. He wanted her to feel like she was interrupting him, like she was intruding. In a way, she was; he had been in his zone and she had brought him out of it. God, he hated this bitch.

"No, Rachel," he said. He felt his eyelid twitch involuntarily. Rachel left, then, and he was alone. Somewhere beyond his office he could hear muffled talking.

He had a headache. His mind was tired, filled with thoughts and confusion and fog and for some reason he couldn't stop thinking about

(*whales*)

blood and the beach. Or bamboo.

(*you're deep deep deep in the fog of withdrawal judie-boy and it's burning a whole in your brain*)

(*the only people who call me judie are at deland's*), he said, firmly, to the voice in his head. Sometimes he could combat them, sometimes not so much, but he was lucky, and the voice shut up momentarily.

What he really needed was some of Eddie Parker's cocaine. But Eddie Parker was dead.

***

Bobbi Williems came in a few minutes later to tell him Marcy wanted him in the dressing room and had he met Palmela Brooks yet, she was charming, *she absolutely had* to ask for the name of her perfume and did he want to say anything to the audience first? A few had arrived and were waiting patiently in the studio.

He decided he did. So he broke away from Bobbi as she led him down the carpeted hallway, horribly outdated with yellow shag carpeting, and ducked into Studio A, saying hi to the guys in the control room and telling them it was gonna go great because they were great guys, seriously, all of them, except for Todd Weisack who went the way of the paparazzi that had almost caught him at

DeLand's two years ago when all of this started and he was naked and hyped up on Eddie Parker and the little *fucker*–

He didn't know what had happened to Todd Weisack. He said so.

"Car accident," said Joshua Zane. Zane was the control room manager and one of Bobbi's friends. He was much nicer than Bobbi, though; he knew his place and did a great job. All the control room guys were fairly obedient, and they all did a great job.

"Oh," Rod said. "That's awful. When's the service?"

Zane cocked his head. "He's in the hospital, is all. He'll be out tomorrow. We went and saw him last week, all of us."

Rod gave him a blank stare. His mind was still slow and strung up and then he remembered; they had gone to see Todd Weisack and he was doing alright, fractured an orbit or something, but it wasn't life-threatening and he'd be good. Rod had been thinking about covering what he could off the hospital costs, because all the control room guys were such good guys. If anyone deserved it, it was Todd Weisack.

(*consume him, peel him apart, boy, or maybe he'll do you first?*)

He blinked and refocused.

"Right," he said quickly. He played it off. "I'm sorry, Joshua, my mind's a little scattered." *He gave a what can you do?* shrug and a sheepish smile. "I still mean to talk with him about insurance, get that all squared away. He's a good guy, doesn't deserve that."

"That's real nice of you, Mr. Garland." Zane said. He beamed. "It's bullshit is what it is, they already determined it wasn't his fault, some drunk dickwad cut across the intersection at Kennedy and—"

"Audience in yet?" Rod asked. He could plainly see a scattering of people in the stands beyond the glass.

"Some," Zane said, nodding at the window. "A few are in media training. Most are returns. Two haven't shown up yet."

"Mind if I say something to them?"

"Not at all, sir."

Rod nodded and mimed tipping his hat as he ducked out of the booth. He turned down the hall, looking back at Bobbi, only to see she had disappeared. She wanted him to get his makeup

(*for deland's, boy, deland's tonight baby deland's tonight, bright lights and all the fine ladies and look at that there's snow on the ground… red snow*)

on and meet Palmela Brooks, but that could wait, because he was certain she wasn't going anywhere and that she'd be back in the future. During her

campaign for governor, for one.

He turned and blew through the doors to Studio A. The scattered audience members turned to face him, and he saw faces smiling, faces beaming, teeth, teeth, teeth.

Studio A was KTAT's largest television recording room, and in the middle of the stage sat a long curved glass-and-mahogany desk that had cost upwards of $8,000 and behind which Rod would sit in a little over an hour's time. It was surrounded by a semicircle of professional-grade video cameras mounted on wheeled pedestals, and behind it were a pair of upholstered leather chairs and a hand-painted backdrop showing the illuminated Boar's Head skyline standing out against the black desert. Members of the production crew, dressed in all-black and wearing headsets, ran wires back and forth along the floor and tested the cameras. A flash went off as he entered and leapt up onto the stage. The heads in the audience followed him. One woman was clapping. He smiled—no teeth—and held out his hands. A modest round of applause greeted them. He spoke quickly.

"Now, this is the part of the show where I like to talk to my audience," he said, going off the nose and speaking both to the crew and the crowd. He wiped the sweat from his brow and made sure his words came out witty. There was a murmur of laughter. The clapping woman broke out in a starstruck grin. He grinned at her.

"The world's changing fast these days, and it's been a helluva week for Our Man In Washington. We've got a show here for you tonight that I'm hoping will ease the pressure a little. I know it's awfully stressful when you learn about the President's sexual life and suddenly understand he has all the same marriage issues as the rest of you." His bachelor status was a running gag. "I think he's giving Clinton a run for his money. Remember Clinton? Any of you?"
He paused for another flurry of applause. He suddenly felt as if he was talking to a brick wall.

"But thank you all for coming. Enjoy the show, and please keep Todd Weisack in your thoughts tonight. He's one of our wonderful crewmembers, and he's resting up at Meyers Memorial as we speak."

He made a mock bow as a jumbled sigh of sympathy came from the audience. On the other side of the room, by the big double doors these people would pass through when the show was finished, was a glass bowl labeled DONATIONS sitting visibly atop a metal cart. He wondered if anyone else had noticed it yet. It would be full by the end of the night, if these people were generous.

"Gotta thank all of ya, again, truly." He straightened and held out two

fingers in a V for peace. That had been his signature ending to *Evening Viewing & Talk Commentary* since the show's premiere; a V with just one hand, not two. He didn't want too many people to think he'd stolen it from Nixon, which he sort of had, but Nixon was long dead.

Then he straightened.

These people loved him.

***

He went down and found some food. He was hungry, and his throat was still tight and sore, but his headache was slightly better. He ate a pear and went up to meet Bobbi in the dressing rooms sometime later. She was pissed.

"There's a fucking schedule, Rodney," she hissed through tight lips. She was wearing a modest black dress which she might have purchased at a price similar to that of the desk in Studio A. He bowed his head; Bobbi was one of those magical people who could seem pleasant and friendly and then cast the demons out at the cause of her frustration on a dime, without warning.

But he was getting out of his funk from earlier. He was getting into character. Sore throat or headache be damned, he was doing fine.

He smiled sheepishly and shrugged. She dragged him into the dressing room and sat him down while Marcy powdered his face. He despised powder and he despised makeup; his face was ghostly pale already, and they had tried to put some color into it when the show first went national, but he had absolutely refused

(*because what if eddie parker had been watching and what if he had seen or the fags and what if the makeup had been enough to jog their memories and theyd known and blown the lid and spilled the beans out like*)

(*ejaculation*)

(*gas bursting out of a dead whale*)

(*NO!!!*)

because he hated makeup. It made him feel feminine, and

(*the two coins shall not cross you can have heads or tails but you cannot have both*)

while he certainly had no vendetta against the gays he didn't want to seem like one.

Rod Garland was a big guy, but he was slender and there was a certain effeminate quality to him, and makeup simply made him uncomfortable. KTAT had gone through enough beauty technicians to be well aware of this; Marcy Launder had only been with them for six weeks. He disliked her the least out of

them all. Marcy Launder made him think of Moon Lander, which was funny to him because he liked the space program, and he kept her around because her name was funny. She was also quite pretty, as was Bobbi, and with these two women crowding around him and Bobbi talking in his ear and Marcy so close to his face, so close that he could count her eyelashes, he could feel his mind slipping down the drain and he knew he would go out again that night, when the show was finished, and maybe he'd go and meet that beautiful girl from before and take care of

(*soft red dreams of soft red oblivion*)

(*it's not bamboo it's white gardenia, deland's is scented like white gardenia and not bamboo and there's a big difference because eddie parker told him so eddie parker made him know*)

(*not since last week*)

The headache returned with a stabbing pain pounding at the front of his skull and he tilted his head back with such suddenness that both women stopped what they were doing to look at him. His eyes watered as he squeezed them shut. Accustomed concern flashed across the face of Bobbi Williams. "Headache, Rodney?"

(*HEADS AND TAILS AND WORLDS POPPING LIKE ROTTING WHALES RODNEY S. GARLAND THERE'S A BAMBOO PARADISE OUT THERE AND* ***YOU WILL NOT FIND IT BECAUSE YOU ARE FUCKING UP!!!!!!***)

"Yes," he slurred, his eyes still closed. The voices were still echoing and bouncing around his skull, a lot of them, most of them having nothing to do with anything, just drifting around aimlessly like shards of glass floating in a puddle.

(*walk the walk that new york talk*)

(*WHOLESALE FULLSALE NOW RUN ON DOWN HERE LIKE YOUR REAR'S ON FIRE BECAUSE IT'S ALL* ***GOTTA GO!***)

(*do you like john lennon, judie?*)

"It's a quarter till," Bobbi said, looking curtly at her watch. It was a tiny little thing that hung from her wrist like a wet and worn shirt hanging from a hook in a washroom, and he marveled that it didn't slide right off and fall to the floor and crack apart.

"Let me get you some water."

(*late*)

(*palmela mayor girl and this girls gonna be governor and shes gonna do a good job but shes gonna lose to a deputy sheriff and hes gonna dig up a bunch of dirt because shes not as good as she seems no no no and shes been to delands and thats where devils lay*)

(***YOU WILL NOT FIND IT BECAUSE YOU ARE FUCKING UP!!!!!!***)

"Fifteen minutes," Rod said slowly. He opened his eyes and looked up at Bobbi; Marcy had stepped away temporarily. Bobbi thrust a small paper cup into his hands. "I need to eat, I think."

"You won't have time to meet the girl, Rodney," Bobbi said sternly. Rod gave her another weak look—he feigned it a little but he really did feel awful, like a giant sledgehammer had been whammed again and again against his skull and then gone on to do a round on his stomach, busting a few ribs in the process and maybe a chewing away some of what was left of his brain. His vision split and crystalized, then went fuzzy, and then returned. This was

(*cold turkey cold turkey youre missing so damn bad judieeee*)

not uncommon, a peculiar aftereffect of his rabid, cavorting lifestyle. A lifestyle not a soul in his professional circle was aware of. But it was especially bad tonight, the worst it had been in a long time, because the voice in his head was right, it was jeering and cheering and entirely correct: he missed Eddie Parker. A line from an old John Lennon song came to mind: Temperature's rising/ *Fever is high/Can't see no future/Can't see no sky.*

(*cold turkey*)

(*good man, shot in the back, very sad.*)

(*do you like john lennon, judie? the girl asked. she was pretty, with a firm body and beautiful legs, plump in the right places and tight in the best places and they had done it so so well but he hadn't seen her face he couldn't see her in the darkness and he was lost in the cyclone and hardly remembered anything from that night, he hardly remembered anything anymore and it was all bamboo and red lighting and beautiful blue eyes, he hadn't felt this in—*)

(*beautiful scent, bamboo everywhere, and it's almost overwhelming and he's surprised he can identify her scent so easily*)

"—no, Earl, she's in the changing room. She touched her hair and now Marcy wants a last go with her, that woman is going to KILL THIS SHOW and *WAKE UP RODNEY*, for God's sake, you're live in *eight minutes*!" Bobbi Williems slapped his face with the intensity of a mother slapping a child who has just uttered a naughty word for the first time.

The knot of anxiety in his gut had burst. He had no idea why. Now he was cracking up, burning up, and all the whale blood trapped within it was tearing through his body and causing all sorts of damage and he would collapse, bleeding from the mouth, in a few seconds, he was certain of it. He felt hot and everything felt loud. Bobbi pulled him out of his chair and dabbed at his face with a neat white handkerchief and marched him to Studio A with the air of a prison

guard escorting a condemned man to the electric chair. Everything felt bright. He bit his tongue to bring himself back, because that sometimes worked, he had learned—he had learned that from the bartender at Boxer's, which wasn't as bright and neon as DeLand's but still a pleasant place. Membership-only. Exclusive. Better to be seen at Boxer's than at DeLand's.

Now they were testing things and he was strapping himself together. He always did; pre-show crashouts were not uncommon for Rod Garland, not uncommon at all, but Bobbi asked no questions and that's why she was in charge. Some sort of stage fright, she said. Stage fright indeed.

I can't get through this.

(*yes you can*) one of the voices answered, this one sounding like his mother, and his mother only came out in the worst of times.

I can't, I can't, the whale's here mommy but you're not here to see it and it's going to tear me apart.

(*you can, boy, get tough you pansy and find that energy and get this parasite out of your head*)

He was sitting up straight. He might just be able to do this, he might be able to pull this off, because Bobbi had started ignoring him again and there was no concern on anyone's face so he knew he must look alright; alright enough to interview a rising political star on a live broadcast to over nine hundred thousand people and not make a fool of himself, at least.

The audience was larger than usual, almost three hundred people spread out and squished behind three cramped bleachers. The clapping woman had moved up front and was wedged between an elderly couple (no doubt here for when he did his mockery of the current administration, who were, currently, not exceedingly popular, not with all the rumors flying around about them) dressed in brown and a very large woman the shape of a marshmallow cream puff. Above her was a young blonde woman with her hair done up like Marilyn Monroe. In the control room, Joshua Zane was counting down, his form barely visible, backlit against the blinding lights gazing down at him. Here he was, counting down for a small boy from the backroads of Wisconsin who now sat in the eyes of the world. Here he was, counting down for a small boy who had flunked out of 11th grade and fled back down to California for a job in one of the Hollywood studios, and he had got it, boy, had he got it. Now this boy was a man and the man was Rod Garland, and he was unsteady at times and fit to break to pieces but he was a *good guy*. Just like the control room guys. A good guy. And that kept him safe from the universe and *just maybe* it would carry him all the way to the bamboo at the finish line.

The room was silent and heavy. The air seemed thick, sluggish. At the back of the room the sign above the door with the donations bowl lit up with a mechanical click. LIVE.

That word was a confusing one.

LIVE.

He wasn't sure he'd ever understand it.

***

When he spoke it sounded like he was hearing himself from a great distance, like the tinny, compressed voice of a disc jockey on a shortwave broadcast coming in from Ecuador or Brazil. His throat felt dry and ragged. He said hello to the camera and ran through his usual pre-interview banter without a problem. The audience laughed on cue. He summoned the energy to dance around the stage a little. He threw out the one-liners and the charm and the usual personality. He practically spat it out. He threw out the pearly whites, and any home viewer could see they were shark's teeth, big tombstone teeth, and he liked them that way. And he was feeling fine. The fluttery, hit-with-a-sledgehammer feeling in his stomach had left, and his vision was nominal. His headache remained, and that was manageable.

When he told the audience (who seemed to be leering forward rather hungrily, with glistening eyes that seemed too big and too wet) who Palmela Brooks was there was a smattering of applause. He needn't introduce her, her name was a common one, but they clapped anyway because they loved him. He hoped she was pleasant. If she wasn't pleasant he'd kill her. She had seemed pleasant on every other show she'd been on, and in public, but those same types of pleasant people could be hellishly difficult for an interviewer because they had a tendency to run away with the conversation, and that was what people would remember about her, he was absolutely sure of it, she'd run away with the conversation and spun it around and nailed Rod Garland with it.

He rapped his fingers against the mahogany desk, breathing heavily and

Artwork by Hollywood

smiling pleasantly and waiting for her to appear and to seat herself next to him so that he could commence the ritual pleasantries (hopefully) without a hitch (maybe) and then go home and collapse and paint his face in red and go out and dance

(*the grating of slow music, slow soul music, somewhere in another room*)

A wave of lightheadedness passed over him and his head suddenly felt as if it was filled with lead rather than brains and bone.

I'm going to faint, right here and right now, right in front of everyone and their mother and the mayor and it's going to be a great big spectacle. And maybe that's what I want. Maybe it's time to let go. Maybe someone will come and help me, then, because I need it, Jesus, Rodney, how'd it get so bad?

(*heads or tails or both garland you can only have one world not two not more one world is all one man can handle*)

He stopped himself from careening forward and bit his tongue again. This time he tasted blood.

Palmela Brooks was sitting calmly across from him. It was if she materialized from nothing, from a secret vortex within the guest's chair.

(*maybe that's how everyone gets here, forget the womb, maybe it's a chair*)

She was a very pretty woman and she held herself with dignity. The New York force she had shown crossing Rawhide was gone; he questioned if it had been there at all. She had changed into a pleasant green suit and she was looking at him quizzically, almost

(*!!!*)

with mild interest

(*!!!!!!!*)

as his eyes continued downwards, caressing her as

(*!!!!!!!!!!*)

he took in this peculiar scent, woody and green and extracted from the young shoots of bamboo plants, bamboo grown from

(*somewhere else*)

Asia?

(*you know this woman from somewhere else*)

or California?

(*and this is all wrong, all going wrong, it's a collision, it's a derailment, and don't look now, rodney, it's all going wrong*)

(*worlds popping like rotting whales, rodney! look up! here it comes! red rain! red rain!*)

(*rodney v white gardenia friday night at 7, one fight only*)

He felt raw and unsteady, and his jaw was locked tight and frozen. The audience was starting to murmur. Several seconds had passed and those seconds were now lapsing into minutes. Murmur built up into a steady buzz. His heart seemed to be thudding behind his ears, beating out of sync, and he could feel sweat beading on his forehead and between his fingers; his breathing was still too loud, a disgruntled panting, the panting of a wild feral animal

(*animals on the road, animals in this city, and dear palmela you know you can't control a serial killer*)

and for a moment that's what he felt like; his hands were not slick with sweat but blood, the blood of strippers and paparazzi, and there was the taste of semen in his mouth and more blood dripping down from a cut in his thigh. Bobbi Williems was watching him with steely gray eyes, eyes of annoyance and concern, and she suddenly had not the head of a human but the shaggy head of a wolf. Palmela was a goat with milky-white fur. The audience was mostly canines, and Joshua Zane, up in the control room, looked like some sort of reindeer. This hallucination was entirely perfect, and he briefly could sense, rather than tell, that he himself was an opossum, only this opossum was squished and warm and mushy and rotting and nailed.

(*nailed by a red farm truck, nailed like his mother and nailed like he would be nailed to the tabloids and the broadcasts and everyone's lips because they'll come find you and kill you like they killed eddie parker, they found him and tore his parasitic throat out, don't you know?*)

Then it changed and he saw a whale, then a bridge, a covered wooden bridge with red shingles and ivy crawling up the roof, and that was worse.

***

He had been young when she died. It had been a chilly day in November, almost exactly thirty years before Palmela Brooks would be elected mayor of Boar's Head, and he had been eight.

There was a bridge in their town, a small town just outside Milwaukee (which came from the Potawatomi phrase *Mahn-a-waukee seepe*, meaning something close to "gathering place at the waters" but more commonly said to mean "The Good Land;" Milwaukee was neither of these nowadays, just old and dirty), and this bridge had been there for centuries. It was a moldy old covered bridge, and on one side was Elmer Road and the Garland residence and on the other was Elmer Road and the drugstore.

It was as much a part of the town's history as the church that would prevent its repair. It was the bridge where young couples went to drink and smoke on Halloween night and the bridge where old rats curled up and died, with rotting supports and a scent that was a mix of birdshit and mold. Everyone had nagged the city council to cough up the cash for a new bridge for years, and it was always put on the discussion board at the town hall meetings. But the Elmer Bridge Problem always disappeared because there were bigger problems, and the bridge was a hazard, yeah, sure, but the church had needed repairs since last year's storm, which had thrown a tree against it and damaged the paint, and that was a manner of religion, which was a whole different subject. The council was comfortable with simply hoping their successors were in office when it finally collapsed.

And finally it did collapse, and someone was killed on it, and that someone was Tabithia Garland, thirty-nine and unhappily married, who was crossing when the eight-thousand-pound red farm truck boarded that little wooden bridge. It had just rained and the supports were rotted and the earth was soft, and that dirty red farm truck sent the entire thing crashing down into the swollen Elmer Stream below and the truck rolled over little Tabitha and mashed most of her upper half into something resembling Spam. That little stream, which had become violently swollen with rain and storm debris, carried her as far south as Kenosha. They found her driver's license in Lindenhurst, Illinois. The state attorney's office said they were lucky to find it at all. She had been awfully hard to identify, he had joked.

(*what a jokester you are i'll kill you i'll come back here and i swear to god i'll kill you and it'll be violent and animalistic and i'll savor every minute of it*)

And the pastor was never charged with anything, not until he got caught with his hands in the cookie jar of a wire fraud scheme and got canned, alongside three members of the council that had chosen to ignore Elmer Bridge. And it had presumably gone on since forever because all the people involved had been there forever and it didn't matter and eight-year-old Rodney Garland didn't care, his mother was gone and it was the church's fault, he knew that much, and that was why he did not believe in God. Because if God allowed that to happen, he was obviously not all-loving, and all eight-year-old Rodney Garland wanted was love. And he would receive no more love from Tabithia Garland because God had taken her away and so he renounced God, and if he encountered Him He ought to cower in fear, cower in fear of what He had produced, this distorted, murdering, drug-addled, sex-crazed leech of a boy.

It had devastated him and his father. His father was a recovering alcoholic

who had been through a few rough patches and more than a few AA meetings and was barely getting by as it was, and he'd continue barely getting by until he got arrested and canned like the pastor and the councilmen and died in prison at the pleasant age of sixty-nine.

Rodney Garland had gone to California to stay with his aunt and his cousin in Oceanside because "daddy had work to do" (daddy was going to go fuck the neighbor and sort out the last arrangements for Tabithia so he could be done with the thing) and "it would be fun." There was a beach in Oceanside, a great big beach with sparkling white sand and a breeze and red-and-white umbrellas set out under the sun, and on the third day his cousin was sick with a fever so his aunt took him down to the beach and there had been a giant beached whale. It had been a hot morning, especially so for February or March, and the air had been salty and humid from the spray the ocean threw up against the rocks. The Pacific stretched on towards the horizon, infinite. Whitecaps emerged and broke apart before reaching the shore. Seagulls drifted around, pecking over scraps of food and seaweed. Tabithia had fed the seagulls when they had gone to New Jersey. They were small over there, half the size of these giant West Coast birds. He remembered thinking that the seagulls must miss her.

He had left his aunt and wandered down the beach to look at the whale. It was gigantic and beautiful, a great big sperm whale, and the sight of such a giant, majestic thing lying down dead in the sand sent a pang of sympathy through his little eight-year-old mind. Its skin was a waxy, pallid gray and sand stuck to its dried out body in great droves, like salt spread on a tablecloth or mold collecting on a rotten wooden support, and it had a peculiar smell, sweet and sour and

(*like white gardenia, not at all like bamboo*)

rotten, because this marian leviathan was decomposing, and when giant whales beach themselves they die and when they die they bloat and when gas builds up to a certain point they

(*pop*)

explode. And it indeed did just that, sending blood and juices and rotting whale entrails all across the beach and little eight-year-old Rod Garland had been quite close, eight feet from it, to be exact, which was well within the blast zone; he remembered a tremendous bang and the sensation of being drenched in something like warm jello, then thrown backwards, laying in a puddle of that same warm stinking mess, and people screaming and someone else crying and then being picked up and carried away by his aunt who thought he had hurt himself but no, it wasn't his blood, it wasn't even human blood, and she

had dropped him and then she had started screaming bloody murder because everything was appearing in shades of red and pink and it was in his eyes and his mouth and everywhere and he solemnly believed that he had carried that whale with him since.

Now the fluorescents seemed to be pulsing with the beat of his heart and the shadow of the dead whale floated, superimposed, over the shadows of the audience. The sledged-in-the-stomach feeling had returned,

(*gas buildup*)

but Bobbi Williems had become human again. She looked worried. He heard Palmela clear her throat and some distant part of his high-strung, withdrawn, half-functioning brain said

(*get tough you pansy*)

that it had only been a few seconds. Half a minute. Everything was too bright and getting brighter and he was enveloped fully and entirely in the fresh scent emanating from the woman seated beside him, a woman he not only lusted for but respected, and in Rod Garland's brain this combination was very rare indeed.

He suddenly spoke to the audience. "Sorry, guys, please excuse me," he said, a shaky grin splitting across his face. He cleared his throat and was surprised at how normal his voice sounded. "I've got a lot of thoughts about Ms. Palmela Brooks and I suppose I went woolgathering amongst them. Slipped away for a second, there. Shouldn't have had that second cup."

A ripple of laughter from the audience. Not cruel laughter, but sympathetic laughter, because it had indeed been an eventful week in the world of national politics and it was bound to be a good show, even the ones who hadn't been there for his impromptu little speech could see. He was off-script, but he could easily correct himself from here. The fluorescents seemed to be dimming, dimming and focusing on him, and the age-old sickness in his body seemed momentarily muted beneath a spontaneous sensation of contentment radiating through him.

The worried ones were settling back. Bobbi was smiling.

He turned to the beautiful woman beside him.

"You all know her, I believe, and some of you probably know her better than myself. It's an exciting time to be in politics, Ms. Brooks. Would you like to give us some insight on that?"

For the first time he looked at her eyes.

They were rich and deep and very blue, not unlike his own, and very expressive. One could get lost in that blue. They were flecked with silver, and look-

ing into them he knew immediately that she recognized him as well. Perhaps she had recognized him from the very beginning, as she crossed Rawhide, looking up at the picture of his face painted above the building. Beyond that knowingness they held a certain type of malevolence, and he was sure she wasn't here to ruin him, or to humiliate him on his own show. In fact, staring into them, he saw nothing but respect.

"I'd like to help people, Rod, I think I've made that clear. It's a bad time, and that's all the more motivation to get out there." She smiled pleasantly and did a *go-gettem* jerk of her arm. "I think Americans deserve an honest voice. It's difficult to live a double life."

(teasing? is she playing with you?)

"I'd say so, but you know it's an uphill battle, with the current abounding scandals of this country. Now, I know your father worked in the governor's office; did he have aspirations of his own, and is that where this desire came from…? Or are you an entirely self-defined woman?"

"I like to think I'm self-defined, although he certainly had his ambitions. He had his own plans for me, and they certainly weren't this. It took some effort and some discipline but I managed to come out on top and take control of my life, and I brought it in my own direction."

She prefaced her next line with a slight smile. "I think that's something everyone is capable of. Perhaps some need a little help, but everyone is capable of taking control of their own life."

It was rejuvenating, in a way, to be speaking with her so casually; it had been a long time since he had met someone so genuinely riveting, so alluring and enticing and engaging, and it left him feeling alive and rather refreshed. It was going wonderfully, and not just for him; many viewers, both those in the audience and those sitting at home, went away maintaining that the interview with Palmela Brooks (who had been on for only twenty minutes, less than a fourth of the hour-long program, although it seemed to stretch on for a miraculous eternity to Rod Garland) was the best segment of that evening's show, perhaps the best segment to appear on *Evening Viewing & Talk Commentary* to-date.

By the end of the evening both interviewer and interviewee were feeling very content and very relaxed, and Rod Garland was beginning to feel the early tendrils of friendship reaching across that dark, crumbling chasm that separated his two lives. He found her after the show and they continued talking. They spoke only briefly. A decision, to rendezvous at a nicer place downtown, was made, and they settled on Baradine's, a nicer chophouse worlds away from DeLand's.

For the first time in years, Rod Garland shared a meal.

ESSAYS

Cultural Archeology Of The Furry Fandom

by Azon Bobcat

PREFACE

This is a rework of one of my older articles from 2022, that is now buried somewhere in the depths of my DeviantArt account, as I feel that it is still a relevant read and probably has to be archived in some more public way, since its original place of "publication" is pretty obscure.

THE ESSAY ITSELF

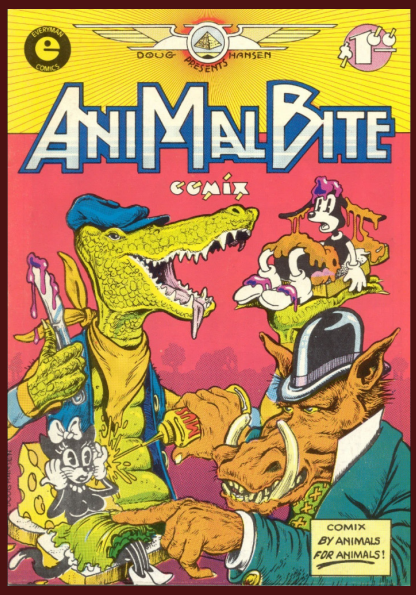
Back in 2022, there were reasons why I had to do it, but they have no relation to the theme of this article so I will leave them to history. I decided to treat the internet like I was 10 years old again - a giant library of previously recorded human knowledge that one can consume at their own pace (and also a free movie theatre, but shh...)

And so I started thinking, almost without any distractions, I started thinking about what was important to me. Important on an educational (and a spiritual I guess) level.

You know that there are only two big things that interest me - Bionicles and Furries (and also design as of recent, but I'm still in a learning process on that part). I know almost everything there is to know about Bionicles, since they were not really a long living toy line (compared to something like Transformers) , but they had lots of books and media to consume, which I did and that was enough.

Furries, on the other hand, move me in an unusual way, that almost noth-

ing can move. It had been like that for 14 years now (yeah I was a furry when I was 12 believe it or not), and because of this more than decade-long reference I started thinking that I miss a large chunk of knowledge of this culture.



Animal Bite Comix
Everyman Studios
1979

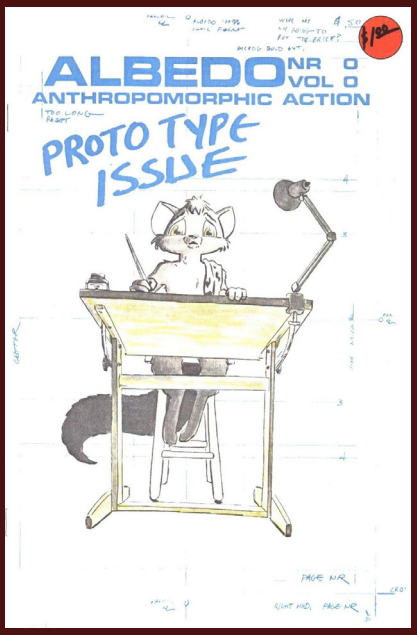
I had always been interested in history of things that I enjoy (mainly art), because I believe that if you want to understand the mechanics of something (read: if you want to steal it for yourself) you have to learn the historical context of that things creation and where it stands in relation to other already familiar things. Lot of stuff that I'm going to talk about from now on will be based on this concept.

So going back to furry fandom. My consumption of furry media started with comics. Here I must point out that I talk about literal media made by furries (and mostly for other furries) and not regular talking animal media. I do not remember under which circumstances, but somehow I stumbled upon a Russian furry site that was hosting translations of lots of furry comics that were either actively coming out or ended by 2012, there I got myself familiar with works of Roz Gibson (which I felt was too adult for my tastes , and dropped her Jack Salem story after the first 20 pages), Jay Naylor, Eric W. Swartz and, my favourite at the time, David Hopkins. (Some of these people will be mentioned further as well).

So now, as an adult, once again I had dwelled in to the realm of anthropomorphic comics, but with a head full of history and reference this time. I already knew about works of Robert Crumb and Steven Gallacci beforehand, and I knew the history of the first 10 years of furry conventions in America. On top of that I knew lot of furry media from the 2000s, thanks to the aforementioned translation website.

However, I knew that this whole thing did not became a wide ranging scene of independent creators and storytellers from just a group of guys drawing scantily clad does without any plot. I knew there were some link between underground comix of the late 60s and a modern furry boom that I experienced when I was 12.

Well, I started looking through anything that had a tag of “anthro” and “comic” on it. Saw some pretty amusing one-shots from Crumb in the 70s, got to see some other strip collections mostly consisting of funny animals acting in a perverse situations (Yeah, I guess that veil of degeneracy had been with us from the start, heh), eventually I got to Albedo Anthropomorphics, despite understanding that it is a great milestone in the history of early furry fandom, I find its political sci-fi drama to be a bit too hardcore for my tastes at the moment of writing, maybe later I will give it another shot. Gallacci’s technical artwork is on point however, you can really see that he’s a draftsman during his day job. Also got to read kind of a fan art issue made for the, then sick, Reed Waller , artist of Omaha The Cat Dancer (And I gotta say it was pretty amusing to see Frank Miller and other famous comic book creators mentioned in a publication with naked cat ladies).



Albedo Anthropomorphics No 0
Thoughts and Images
1983
One of the inspirations for this zine.

Furrlough No16
Antarctic Press
1994

Eventually I got to the comic that made me write this whole thing up, and kinda helped me get a giant chunk of reference on furry fandom compared to the more mainstream media and even helped me realize my own place here.

So the thing that I had discovered was an anthology publication called Furrlough. It started in the 1991, at the beginning of 90s comic book speculator craze, so medium was as popular as ever. It also started three (?) years after the beginning of Furry Conventions, so I would guess the core audience was formed by that time, which was enough to validate a creation of an entire anthology for Furry Fans (and by Furry Fans!).

From here on I’ll do a little review of the whole publication and give some recommendations of the stories I liked.

So, the book started as a black and white military sci-fi anthology, but after about 13 issues expanded in to basic adventure and comedy as well. My favourite fact about the early issues is that lots of stories were basically "big booba furry chicks hang out on a tank in the middle of the desert", and the funniest part is that all these tales were independently created by different people. I guess these images were in the zeitgeist at the time.

Panel form **Watering Hole part 3**, by Pat Kelly. Published in Furrlough No16, 1994

For me, the first notable story was **Here Comes a Candle** by the late **Mary Hanson-Roberts**. It was an adventure story about aristocrat cats based on the French revolution. Not the kind of story I'd be usually interested in, but the author did an amazing job on the foe-woodcut artwork, overall story and writing, and most importantly, she delivered all chapters in time for the next issue.

Then there was **Walter Kitty** stories by **Mark Shaw**. These were not graphically advanced, but had their own cute style to them. The two stories he wrote and illustrated were pretty campy spoofs of pulp-era tropes, but I liked them for just being a good story with and enjoyable artstyle.

Watering Hole by **Pat Kelly** was probably the first one that impressed me artistically. While all other comics around it looked pretty cartoony (and mostly in a stereotypical furry artstyle of the 90s looney-tunes knock offs) Watering Hole looked like author actually took time to study real animals instead of cartoons. It's drawn in something we would call a "semi-realistic artstyle" nowdays, but compared to all other stories, his stuff might as well have been real. As for the plot, I can't say much, this sci-fi story was not finished and kinda got abandoned. What a shame.

Live By The Bullet, Die By Blade by **Randy Zimmerman** and **Scott Brooks** (pictured above, on the cover of Furrlough No16) was the one where I was just blown away. The art simply can compete with any black and white offerings from 2000AD or Heavy Metal Magazine. Honestly, It still holds up today and If I had to recommend one story out of others, this would be it. It's the first one in issue 16, so go search it out if interested.

Panels from **Pranksters: Death of a Lotus** by Scott A. H. Ruggels. Published in Furrlough No 51, 1997

I Can write like that for a long time, but I think we are both getting tired of all this nerdiness now, dear reader.

Before I conclude this article, I have to say that I had read about 60 or so Issues of Furrlough, big chunk of which were issues form the 90s, almost uninterrupted, ironically, as Internet started becoming more mainstream the issues got more and more gaps between the archived ones. I only saw about 4 from XXI century and they had hit some emotional chords with me. I saw people whom I knew, with whom I'm familiar already from my solo adventures in discovering furry media before. I saw art by Dark Natasha, Jay Naylor, Baron Engel, and most importantly to me, David Hopkins. more than that, it was a small story set in the universe of his other comic that I had read as a kid.

It felt like I made a full circle, it was a story from 2007, I was practically looking at the back of the head of my own 12-year old self on the horizon, reading stories by the same creator. It was pretty surreal experience, similar to how Hunter Thompson described an opium high, I felt like I graduated furry

school or something. Right there I realized that if I didn't knew every creation of my fellow furries from the past, I at least got a big vertical slice of everything that was happening with some of its most creative minds since (in my opinion) its inception in the late 60s.

Maybe you would like to take a similar journey to mine, maybe even in other themes not related to furries at all. All I know is that I feel more enlightened, *and maybe you will feel too as well.*

Furrlough 100th issue celebratory printed shirt, originally available in 2002. Art by Joe Rosales

You Should Draw a Comic. A Rant/Guide

by Azon Bobcat

So, do you draw? Do you have characters? Do you have overarching headcanons about them? Do you have universes percolating in your scull cavity, waiting to be vomited out on to an unsuspecting public?

I know I do, and *I hate it a lot.* I bet you've seen multiple examples of people posting ref sheets upon ref sheets of their characters, followed up by walls of lore in the descriptions, maybe some of you even participate in such activities, *I know I do*. And I'm not a big fan of this as well. There is a president for such activity, since it builds audience and creates bonds between your characters and your readers, but I see a problem when the whole output of an artist just becomes these microscopical vignettes and new character updates and new character descriptions and refs of their outfits and refs of their pets and so on and so on. It is just an endless stream of concepts without a structure or story.

Now you are probably going to think that I criticize people who just want to develop their stuff before eventually turning out an "opus magnum", just give it one more year, one more month, one more week and its going to be done, *don't be mean to an artist, Mister Bobcat, they are sensitive creatures*. And to that I will say - yes, I criticize exactly these people and *I am mean* to them, because I want these people to succeed, and almost none of these who participate in such culture of endless concepts and updates does. And even these who do turn out their work in 10 years or so, eventfully realize that it is not as good because they did not have any experience beforehand so their thrilling narrative of epic proportions actually falls flat and finds almost no lasting audience, even within the core of authors original fans.

Yet, there is a solution, and that solution is a narrative sequential structure known to us as a Comic. "Yea, but isn't a comic just the same thing as what you described above?" It is not if you approach it competently.

Now, before I'll tell you how to do it I must answer another question - why not just a novel or an animation, or straight up a movie? Well, because it is a perfect combination of budget, skill and narrative. You can tell an expensive and cool looking story, give it your personal visual flare and still make it emotionally engaging to the reader, while spending almost no money and much less time if you do it smart. It will be more approachable than just a wall of text, and it is much more cheaper than doing an animation, while actually being a great exercise if you want to animate - because you will learn how to draw your characters doing more things than just "standing in a cool pose", you can easily convert sequential panels in to storyboards, and if you don't want to animate anything yourself - comic can be a much better pitch than just a handful of characters and descriptions.

What should you do then? I just said that there are almost no first-try masterpieces, so what is this artwork going to be about? I'd suggest taking a snippet of your universe or a characters backstory and making a kind of a short spin off of your future masterpiece, kind of an appetizer if you will. Just make it **short** so it will be in the frame of your skills (about 20 pages should be more than enough), give it a complete structure, beginning, middle and an end, let it be a good story on its own, but give it enough detail and references so it can play in your future works.

Now... *wtf should you do if you've never drawn a comic in your life?* Even 20 pages can be very imposing to a person with actual real life outside of art. You can wing it, of course, but I say that you will probably get tired of it halfway through. So here are sources that I personally learned from on how to make comics relatively quick and dirty:

1. The fundamental structure - understanding what is sequential storytelling and how to make it so reader also gets what you are trying to say. For this I'd say just go buy or pirate books by **Scott McCloud: "Understanding Comics"** and then **"Making Comics"**. These are a great and comprehensive source on how to get in to a mindset of drawing an understandable comic (they are also great graphic design books if you like that as well)

2. Building on top of the structure and actually finishing something - how to not *give up* after your first page. For that you should seek out a Japanese educational TV show called **Urasawa Naoki no Manben** (idk how you find it, and personally I do not care, find a way to stream it, or pirate as well). It's a show about Mangakas, and especially their *process* of working on books that require an output of around *40 pages a week*. Now, before you start throwing bricks at me, I must state that I personally have no fondness for manga or anime, yet I still found this show to be greatly educational. It doesn't matter what the subject of their stories is, or who the author, you should watch as much episodes of it as you can find, because it presents and invaluable amount of tricks and lifehacks on how to draw a story quick and make it look good enough for the reader to still be impressed.

I don't think that you need anything more on top of that, if you can draw a character and a cube you will do great with the sources listed above.

That's it, now go educate yourself and actually finish something for once (*or tell me to go fuck myself, if you want*).

SNIPPETS

Foreward
by Cake Sanchez

I've always believed that my heart is impaled by a thin copper wire. It's punctured by this frail thing, and somehow the wire has managed to knot itself up inside. At any given point, somebody will grab ahold and start tugging. I can't possibly begin to guess who, the wire stretches out past my horizon. All I know is someone's pulling, and that there is a pressure. There is a suffocating, clam-plike compaction as that cruel knot gets tighter. Usually I am given a direction. Today they are tugging from the north. This evening, the south. I suppose I ought to head that way. I need to meet the devil behind this yanking madness. This is typically how my days unfold.

It is a murderous thing, following. It is the next door neighbor to nightmare. To quote Dusty: "When you walk-behind then the view never changes, baby. The view never changes, baby. The view never changes." Of course, following begets trapping, trapping begets keeping. When I find you, wire puller, when I get my garden rake hands on you… That's the day in, day out. When I… When I… I'm gonna… I oughta…

I've been a walk-behinder to the tug all my life. Art is my attempt at a left lane pass. It's just one honest effort towards seeing something new. And it is one effort. Every drawing, every flash fiction, every match. That's all one effort. The day it ends is the day it succeeds. I'll drop my pen, paper, kickpads, etc. into the landfill behind my apartment, made all by myself, by the countless drafts and revisions that brought me to this point. I'll look at the heap and say that I've

*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1AGjiIQKxNE

finally seen it all, and I'll cut the wire with a pair of kitchen scissors I got from Kroger that morning. When I'm walking around, the now loose knot will bounce around within my heart, sounding like a cowbell when I run. I'll hear the tinny clang-clang-clanging of the little ball tumbling back and forth and it'll remind me of when I used to make art. Those forgotten, dreadful days when that stupid brown line kept me from seeing wonders right in front of me. That is, it did, until I wrote enough words and made enough doodles, enough to teleport directly to the house of that sick bastard who was pulling on my heart. His body is buried deep below the drafts.

Alas, that day has yet to come. This publication will have to suffice. For me, this is more than a simple zine. This marks the first time I've ever been a part of a furry project. That's not to say I've never made furry art, but rather, I've never made art as a part of another, larger whole. In general, I have kept to myself. I have not made many furry friends. I am not a part of many furry circles. This was always by design. But recently, I've been called upon. I was waiting on a commission and my soul decided: once this is finished, I'm going out. If you want me back, you'll have to follow me.

I am not one to speak on the meaning of my work, but there is a slight note I'd like to add regarding "To Be Bunny." This is a work that I've had stored in the catacombs for a while. I'm no stranger to the various lit journals that populate the internet. There are many I long to be featured on, and many still I long to learn more about. I've been lucky to get a couple publications here and there, some even about furries, but "To Be Bunny" never could find a home. The reason being that I simply never tried. Every couple days, I'd take a look around the lit journals accepting submissions, contemplating whether this was the right one for my little prose poem. I never did quite find a place that felt right, at least, not in the way I was looking for.

As stated, I've published furry work in non-furry journals before, but I just can't bring myself to do it with this one. I wrote "To Be Bunny" in about 20 minutes after watching Eddie Kingston footage on YouTube. Specifically, I watched Eddie's old promo from CHIKARA, you know the one*, and then I watched him wrestle Jun Akiyama and I cried. I cried a lot and after wiping my tears I took a lap around my room, sat down, and vomited "To Be Bunny" onto my keyboard. I always workshop my stuff, everybody does, but I didn't touch that file ever again.

To tell you the truth, I still don't think this is the right place for it. I want it to be chiseled into Stonehenge. Let's get it printed and framed in every Presidential Library. Display it via light-up drone morse code above New York City. Why do I want this? I truly don't know. I don't think it deserves it. But that's what I want. However, I'm shoving those feelings to the side, and by God I'm publishing it here in Tall Tails Worldwide. The plain truth is I never would've written that mess if I wasn't a queer furry faggot. This marks my first instance of ever being involved in queer furry faggotry. As such, this is where this poem will rest forever. May she sleep light.

My other work featured here, "Late-Night Cave Shadow Sex," took a lot longer. This one is about furries in the real world. As in, the humans behind the animals. If I'm being honest, I hardly ever write about genuine furry critters. Just about everything has always been the people. My line of thinking is that all the furries are making furry stuff, but where are the furries making human stuff? We don't exist online (not for lack of trying) and somebody's gotta talk about the real ass situations we find ourselves in. It's a subject I've tried tackling a lot lately. Some have found success (check out "Room Party Bagua" on ExPat Press) while others are still finding their footing (check out "1994 Skate Heaven PA" to be published in the near future) and others are just plain bad and won't see the light of day. No matter their status, the truth remains: I like to write about the mascot people. Tar and feather me if you wish.

All of this is to say: Thank you for reading. It means more to me than you know. I hope you find something in this work, and I hope to see your work too.
Long live anthro fiction, friends. We will all make it in 2026.

Late-Night Cave Shadow Sex

by Cake Sanchez

He's wearing his gas mask when you get home. Twenty-five messages throughout the workday, digital heat beams for the mind. Four in the shower (good morninf (mornign*((MORNING**)) how'd you sleep?) eleven on the commute (listening to quetzalcoatl rn, never heard of that, its by tito, who?, tito, oh ok, it's from the seventies, i said ok) five before lunch (guess what I'm wearing, guess what I'm wearing, guess what I'm wea…) two during lunch (oh my god are you free tonight?, yesssssss) Three as you clock off. (heading back home, ok good i still have my mask on, yes i know)

The messages soothe you. They hold your strings taught during the meetings, they ventriloquize your mouth in the break room. You're not there. Your mouflon has his gas mask on at home. Check your phone, nobody's kidding here. Send a text and you're home. ARMv9, Boolean algebra and a notable decline in pickpocketing lets you go home any time you want. Just check your alerts and there you are, home, hooves on the concrete. Clip-clop into the house, your house, their house, stable and pen.

You're browsing home at the cafe. Occupying the corner table-for-two, just you, your laptop on the other end. Lots of work to get done, working overtime, waiting for dinner. What's he having for dinner? Give the door a quick knock, slide the message "how're the leaves?" underneath and return to work. Haha. He'll get a rise out of that. Your number is called, your meal is ready, you pick it up at the counter and return to your tiny corner. There's a message: "We've been over this. Foliovores eat leaves, mouflon are graminivores, I would eat grass. I can't believe I have to remind you."

The nerve!

It's a quiet ride to the farm. You like to help out when you can, but between your work and your sheep—He's a sheep, who gives a damn about the specifics anymore—it gets hard to find the time. They let you feed the animals, they say you have mellow eyes, that's how they know you're good for it. The only one they don't let you feed is the bull but they promise it's for your own good. You stand out on the precipice, leaning on the wooden fence, analyzing the bull from all perspectives. Physically, the bull's a bull. Emotionally, the bull's him. Spiritually, the bull's you. Realistically, the bull isn't. But God, imagine it was?

Imagine having a body like that. You suppose that you do when you're home but when you're out? Hah. When you're out. You can't even lift a fork, too scared to wear short-sleeve shirts, you have to ask for help putting paper in the printer but you swear you're trying. There's a notecard with a daily workout regimen taped to your closet door, you have an uncanny knack for waking up on time. The bull draws ancient runes in the dirt with its right hoof.

And how about those horns? You think about how his gas mask is custom-made, curving fibonacci spirals on either side. You wish you had that kind of money. Well, you do. Really you just lack the courage to buy something like that. The nose ring was a good start but that got old quick. One photo and he was already over it, but you get jolty every time you see him in that mask. The bull dunks its horns into the watering tank, just to show off for you. Look how they glisten, see how they shine, notice they're mine.

You're watching The Moment of Truth together in an hour. This is a big day for you. This film is what made you a bullboy. It was the scene where Miguelín jumped the guardrail, all the toreadores trying to draw the bull's attention away from the man infiltrating the field. The way that poor bull spun towards their muletas, left and right and left again, stuck charging the waving rosy sheets. He knows you as Miguelín, that's what you tell him you're called. You wanted to be Miguelín after seeing how he ate at his hostel, you cried when the film ended but it had nothing to do with the dead bulls, it was entirely because of how Miguelín ate his bread. So collected, so starved, no different from any other man in the room. Thirty beds worth of hungry, concentrated people, looking at nothing but their soups and their loaves, fishing for the good life hidden down in the bowl.

He's getting antsy, watching this. Restless. You can hear the shuffle of his bedsheets over his microphone. The bailaora swishes her skirt and you can audibly hear him losing focus. Miguelín is there in the crowd, stabbing at potatoes with a knife. He's become a top name and there he is, still strangling anything he can get his mouth around. It's that struggle, that's what you love him for, that constant struggle even at the top. "I'm bored, could we watch something else?" He says, exaggerating a fake yawn. "Or, you know… Do something else? I can get my mask from the desk."

The time has come to get to work. He's turned his camera on, demonstrating his special mask and his special abs and he's curling his finger like you're an alley cat creeping towards his catchpole. You've muted your mic, typing ahh and mmfh and yes right there and you still have The Moment of Truth open on another tab. He's asking you to tug on his horns, Miguelín is petting his opponent on the head, two seconds later the bull is panting and waiting eagerly, a delusional dying mutant beagle playing with their owner. A couple more ohhhs sent his way to keep him happy, the bull is bleeding now, staggered, and you know it won't be long. He says something to you but you aren't paying attention, the bull falls down trying to tap Miguelín's toes. He slaps the bull's mouth and for a moment that's all he does before remembering to hold his bloody hand to the audience.

You think maybe the act of mockery has become natural to Miguelín, yet he still needs some time to recognize why.

Exhausted, your sheepboy asks how it was for you and you want to say: "I've never felt more detached. I want to throw you off a mountainside. I want to buy beef stew and pour it over myself in the shower. I want to step outside and feed the chickens but you just fuck and fuck and you weren't even paying attention to the movie. You know, it actually looked fun. I'm being serious, the sword didn't even seem that sharp. I bet I could take it. Do you think I could take it? Why don't you try? Why don't you fly over here and stab me in my head, like all the major players do?"

Instead, you say nothing. He isn't perfect, and he's never fair, but he's your own kind, and he's the only one you have. He's been in this world longer than you and he knows the customs better than you. He's been to more places, he's talked to more boys, woofboys and meowboys and squeakboys and it's the bullboy he wants, the thin frail capeboy who can't even breach a cardboard box.

Tomorrow is gonna come, and if you choose to speak up it'll still come, only now you'll wake up with regret and ache and nobody not anybody at all to chat with. You'll complain and you'll grovel and you'll wish there were no other men but human men, and you'll wish you were a human man, and you'll look down at yourself to see human hands on human arms and you'll jump for joy and scream "finally!" because yes, finally, you can love like humans do. Only you.

To Be Bunny

by Cake Sanchez

And I wouldn't trade being human for anything in the world but if God lent me a wish I know exactly what I'd want. Blame it on Mel Blanc, what do I care well I do care a little well actually I care a lot. Why blame anything? Is something wrong? Might makes right but I say white takes flight cute white in the burrow nite with root and clover and maybe if white feels himself a little blue jacket ah but you'd blame him too. The root cause is and goodnight moon on the book-shelf oh and you can't forget whats-his-name with the watch oh yes we can't forget him with the watch lord if I only bought a different kind of battery maybe then he'd. What's wrong? Is anything wrong? Has to be. Must be. There's got to be something more there's bound to be something more than burrow nite than thump and tumble polka-dot buck hop hop hop hop white goes hop in his little blue jacket white goes right to the dumpster white wants the dumpster but oh what happens to his little blue jacket. Roll in the dirt dreamlike but clean your little blue jacket thoughtlike lifelike reallike iron it out hang it up brush it off and don't forget to shower. The water goes woosh and white likes to imagine tufts on his elbows white puts shampoo on his clean fleshy elbows. White sleeps tight in his burrow nite and he dreams of muck of homelessness of raging rampant homelessness there in the lot in the trunk all his life in the trunk but he wakes up to dirt under his fingernails and it makes him want to hurl.

I really mean it I don't want to be an animal what's an animal gonna do for me. I'm not saying I want to be dumb although I feel that way sometimes. I like being on two feet and I like making guacamole and I like swinging on the rope swing with the little wooden block my grandpa made for me but if I could do all that with a cottontail jesus christ I'd shoot myself I'd be that happy I'd probably

run into traffic because I know it isn't getting any better except for the next day when it's still there and I'm still something a little different than what I am and then I'd know that life can't ever end not while I'm white here white now white in the truelike white feels alright with his big pointy ears touching the twigs as he swings on granddaddy's swing he built just for his little bunny boy.

But you know he used to and my dad he used to but I don't think they're to blame. A hardheaded shit because I couldn't fold a table no dinner because I left a DVD in the player slams on the door staying in a hotel just to get away for a while but I don't blame them. Blink your eyes and I'm cozy every night with my plushies in my arms soft squeezy friends going on adventures looking for trouble hiding behind the fridge playing with green paint but I don't blame them either. There's this certain feeling your soul gives you when something is right white knows right from wrong because white has this rope and this rope is quite tight around white but you know what gives it slack you know what loosens the knot I don't even have to say what it is. You have rope too yes you I'm talking to you. You have a knot too yes you do. And sometimes you'll get a little tug a little push that's your soul telling you what to do to get that rope a little looser and you'll listen and you'll feel good but it's gonna take time it always always does. Lucky you. Chosen field happy family one day that rope is gonna get so loose it might as well disappear for you but for me I just have this little blue jacket. And yes I did say lent because only humans make it to Heaven.

So white writes white while white wants white so white goes to the worksite and white views websites to buy little blue jackets that gaslight white into feeling like white is more than some misty sight he sees in the burrow nite. He hates it he can't ever like it he wants no part of it but there's nothing else but there's got to be more to this. I can't feel this way if there isn't more to this that's not allowed that doesn't happen. More than parties, more than innocence, more than dumb brain drooling on the carpet scratching drooling more than that there just has to be. I know there is the proof is how I feel I can't feel it if it isn't true that's not how it works I feel my feeling and I know the feeling is real because I feel it so why should I be allowed to feel something real for something fake no no I believe there's more to it than a silly helmet and comix yes there's more to it than that otherwise what are we doing here.

And maybe if he never watched max & ruby this could've all been avoided haha yeah right. Maybe if he weren't left-handed maybe if the schools didn't

have mascots maybe maybe whatever here's an idea maybe it was always going to happen because there's nothing on this planet in this country that could ever keep a heart from wanting what it does and there's never gonna be a contradiction bad enough to keep you from following the rope anyway because there's just you the human and me the human and we both want different things and they'll put flowers on your grave and webkinz on mine and your grave will have your name but mine will have white I promise you it will I'll do whatever it takes to make it happen I swear to God I will.

The Fox On Sixth

by Milo

There's a bar on the corner of the street named The Fox on Sixth

It's a lively joint, been around for thirty five years. Premiere football fanatics and construction workers on break keep it busy during the day. The weekly concerts and drag shows bring in the night crowd.

Heck, it might even be one of the few places in this city that you can say has a night life. All without catering to the oil money that flows through this city's veins.

By all counts a success story, but it's on death's door all the same.

All because some men in suits realized they could be making a little bit more if the Fox was dead and gone.

We don't know when the Fox will disappear, all we know is that plans have already been submitted.

Most are making noise, trying to win over the right people to keep the Fox alive.

Others are in mourning while The Fox is still breathing. Praying that the thread holding the blade above The Fox's neck takes another day to break.

I can't help but do both.
I hope the right person listens to our passion and lets The Fox see another thirty five years.

But until that day, Five dollar IPA's will be my ambrosia.

The wall of premiere league scarfs will be my Louvre.

And I will treat every night like my last.

Until the final call.

The Only Win That Matters

by Henry Helwig

It was the tenth time she'd checked her bag, and it was the tenth time the content remained the same. The bag was nothing special, ratty fibers stuffed to the brim with everything she could buy, borrow or steal in a day. Worn tools painted in red and blue, a basic blaster pistol, some ration bricks in her favorite flavors, a rough wooden crustacean the size of her palm, and the bundled parcel she'd been sure to wrap twice and bury to the bottom. She'd even spent thirty of her rapidly dwindling credit supply to buy a fraying woolen sweater, fearing the cold above. A week ago she'd have considered it a bounty beyond compare, worthy of rubbing in the face of everyone who had doubted her; now it felt woefully inadequate to ensure she never saw them again.

Stuffing her fears into the pack, she forced herself to take a breath, frills against her neck practically spasming in her internal struggle against terror. The hard part was over, all she had to do was leave. Everything worth a bent credit had been sold, every bridge that needed burning had been burnt and the two people who deserved goodbyes on this shitty rock had wildly inadequate notes stuffed under their doors. There was nothing left for her here, and everything left for her up there.

Luckily, she'd lit a fire under her own ass. **He'd** be awake soon, and find his power had finally failed him. That her discovery was hers again, along with several unrelated items that she, in her unfailing wisdom, had decided to also liberate. Letting that spiteful thought warm her, she ducked under the weathered tarp serving as a door, where an exploratory glance would confirm the presence of a thick smog settled across the street. The vents hadn't kicked in for morning

shift yet, meaning the night shift was behind in processing. Taking advantage of their misfortune, she slunk into the choking cloud, relying on years of muscle memory to guide each step through the fumes, eyes squeezed shut more by instinct than caution. After all, it took decades of exposure to go blind. She just needed tonight.

According to management, the town was originally meant to resemble the roots of a tree on some far off planet, each of the three central streets splitting off into street after street, a perfect paradigm. But after a hundred and twenty years of scavver occupation, the town's grid more resembled a shattered pane of glass, a fact she knew infuriated the leadership. Leave it to them to cry over spilt aesthetic. But it was these flaws that-

Wait. She paused, a hint of fury prickling behind her shut lids. No. No reminiscing. This place had taken so much from her. Health, potential, years of life spent rooting around titanic guts for wiring and gauges. This place would not take her hate for it on top of everything else.

It took more than an hour for the sirens to go off, and by then she had reached the outer boundary of Prosperity, where foundries and factories held sway. Of course, it wasn't an alarm for her, at least not directly. To earn a siren like that, a crime would have to be committed the company cared about, which did not include scavengers stealing from one another. If she had to guess, her face and name had been tied to a recent accident or act of sabotage, thanks to some conveniently donated evidence. Maybe he even told the truth of what was in her pack, if he wanted to burn down the bounty rather than let her claim it. The very idea made her smirk, an upwelling of smug superiority rising in her breast. He wouldn't dare. Not with this on the line.

Too slow, fucker.

The rest of the journey passed as if in a dream. The scream of security drones sweeping outwards faded as she slipped into the Yards, the corpses of long dead ships providing the perfect cover to make her way south. Twice she had to duck into hiding spots to avoid security forces, but neither patrol looked particularly invested in the manhunt. After all, nobody left Prosperity, it just didn't happen. Ship fare to the nearest station was two good years of salary, ten if you were a scrap picker like her, as long as you didn't mind not eating for the dura-

tion. And as she was reminded every time she glanced to the horizon, leaving on foot was not an option. Scorched rock stretched on and on, from one end of the moon to the other, only interrupted by the solar array a thousand miles to the south. In her life, she'd watched several condemned men run past the boundaries before, security didn't bother to stop them. They either ran back to face jail, or were never heard from again, a win-win for the company.

She reached the edge of the Yard just as dawn broke, the place where everything simply… ended. The rusted fences and picked over mountains of useless scrap gave way to the expanse beyond. Pulling her eyes away, she focused on the only landmark worth a damn this far from town. A rusted beast, easily a century old, stood as a monolith against the sun, having been propped up to shield the local spaceport. Not that it was really worth shielding, the port was a roughly half mile stretch of stone and metal with crudely drawn landing zones etched every couple hundred feet. Of the three transports parked there, only one was waiting for her.

The man didn't say a word as she approached, didn't even spare her a glance. They didn't know each other, they never would. The trade didn't include pleasantries. Kneeling, she dug into her thrice patched pack, gingerly extracting the parcel as if it was a holy relic. The dirty rags fell away under the man's errant gaze, revealing an object held in scrapper myth. A sleek black tablet, streams of data running along its cool black surface. It had no ports, no keyboard, no analog visible across its form. An intact military AI core. Normally the entire chamber housing these was either disassembled or incinerated before any disassembly, depending on the paranoia of the commanding officer. Rumor had it the Feds would pay quarter a million credits to anyone bringing one in for safe destruction, and she had no reason to doubt that figure, even if she was in no position to claim it.

The man's breath hitched, and for a moment her heart raced. Did the alarm spook him? Stabbing her and running with the core felt chillingly possible at this moment, a fortune for the price of nothing with none of the baggage. She flinched as his hand reached… and picked up her bag, tossing it into the transport's open hatch, whilst the other hand rewrapped and hid the piece under his jacket. Transaction complete.

It was only as they rose did she feel safe. She needed it, in a way, gawking

down the town and its scrapyards. Letting the scarred landscape shrink into insignificance from the shuttle window. Only after the moon was a mere speck did Aya allow herself to uncurl two scarred middle fingers towards her now former home, and intone the phrase that would resonate for the rest of her life.

"Get *FUCKED!*"

Thane Alone

by Henry Helwig

02:14.

Ninety-six hours ago, Thane Al Riok had been a man with a future. Captain First Class of the Federation Navy. Four successful skirmishes against pirate skiffs resulting in their complete obliteration. Two dozen deliveries of troops, diplomats and emergency supplies. A successful extraction from a war zone. And most importantly, an impeccable record of obedience, quality work and logistical perfection. He'd been told in no uncertain terms he'd make Rear Admiral within one decade. Vice Admiral by the second. By all measures, his career was a picture perfect example of loyalty and devotion to the Federation cause.

Malicious Destruction of Restricted Military Property over 10,000 credits in value: Minimum Sentence of Dishonorable Discharge and Fine equal to the damage plus 15,000c.

A firm hand silenced the light of the cheap clock, yanking the steadfast numbers into the black. Thane tried yet another steadying breath. Every broadcast and radio serial touted the deep breath as a calming force beyond reproach, yet his dread only grew. His heart may no longer have raced, but the pit in his soul only grew. Regret, recrimination, doubt. And no one to blame but himself. It was gone. All of it. Nearly twenty years of work destroyed in a single expedition. His housing would be seized by now, along with his accounts. One very carefully packed duffel bag and a bounty was now all he had to his name. Well, that and…

Theft of a Federation Military Battleship. Minimum Sentence: Life in Prison. Downgrade of rights to Citizen Class 3. Fine of 100,000c, plus any damages to the ship.

The first day had been easy. Take the ship after disabling the drydock defenses. Strong initial burst of momentum to get a head start on any authorities. Remove and eject the three transponders in the command center, aft deck 2 and security locker respectively. Turn off life support and power to the rest of the ship to preserve limited fuel and oxygen. Engines cut after twelve hours in one direction, slightly shifting course with retrorockets to throw off any pursuers. Turn off all personal gadgets with a battery larger than a watch, or in his case, a clock. The lights go out, and he'd be just another piece of scrap metal barely detectable by sight, much less scanner. Such a direct plan required no self reflection, only the willingness to follow orders (albeit his own). Simple. Straightforward.

Aggravated Assault of Military Personnel with a Deadly Weapon. Manslaughter, First Degree, of Military Personnel. One count of First Degree Murder of a Military Officer. Minimum Sentence: Life in Maximum Security Prison, Seizure of all Assets by Federation. Downgrade of rights to Citizen Class Null.

Easy. Like how the neck snaps with just the slightest pressure. How with a press of a button, the smell of blood and shit vanishes through an airlock. How the taste of bile can be ejected via a nearby trashcan. How one can watch their every hope and dream wither and die on the vine of your self-deluded crimson ego trip **you fucking-**

Throwing the clock against a wall helped. It was a petulant, pointless and ultimately wasteful gesture, but it kept the pit fed for yet another moment. In a far more aware corner of his mind, he knew he was cracking. Darkness, isolation and trauma did not mix well, and even with his will, the darker thoughts were becoming more and more frequent. If he were a soldier under his own command, he'd have sent himself for psychological evaluation over this ordeal. Unfortunately for him, he wasn't in charge here.

An outside observer might say what he did to the few that impeded him was just. Those he killed, wounded or betrayed sold their comrades, *his crew,* for their own comfort. But personal connection is rarely as simple as good and evil. Sgt. Poyl, whose kids kept sending care packages of cookies that went bad

weeks before arrival. Poyl never said a word, lest they stop coming. A serpentine engineer whose name Thane never caught, who once took the time to fix his communicator before all the others in the queue. Never asked for anything in return, not even a kind word. Admiral Kryth, once a mentor, who promised Thane the stars if he just looked the other way this one time. They were his people, just as much as his sold crew.

And if they deserved to die for betraying their own, didn't he?

No. A terse breath would silence any further proliferation of the thought. He had allowed much to infiltrate his mind, perhaps too much, but not that. There was more at stake than just loyalty. More than mere bonds of shared service. Justice, lives and even… *deeper* emotions were in play. And if he started to question if he deserved to be on the other side of that airlock, then it would all be for nothing. There was still a job to do.

Theft of Classified Joint Corporate/Federation Intelligence and/or Assets. Minimum Sentence: Death.

Twenty seven hours. At this speed he'd reach neutral space in twenty seven hours. Then it was just a hop, skip and interstellar jump to an ostensibly uninhabited star system with more numbers in its name than letters. According to the files he stole, that was where he'd find what was left of his crew. And hopefully after that… some form of catharsis. Absolution. *Anything*. For now though. Sanity. Survival. Endurance for just one more day…

As if to dispel his self reflection, a flicker of light caught the eye, the "discarded" clock now a strobing dancer at the periphery of his vision. One quick push off the floor closed the distance, allowing him to retrieve the anemic light that still shone through the shattered plastic.

02:17.

"Damn it."

Cheating Death

by Classic Cheese

My eyes open, jolting me awake, but all I'm surrounded by is darkness.

Panic follows, then a sense of overwhelming dread. My body is weighed down by exhaustion, soreness tearing through my muscles. Where am I? Body feels… strange. Bigger, heavier, slower. Like I'm moving through water. Can't see anything, head's pounds too much to think. The ground beneath me is soft, but crunches as I shift my weight. The cold air fills my lungs and wakes me up as I take a long, deep breath, closing my eyes. Focus. The headache fades away into a numb static. *Feel your senses sharpen*, use it. Fresh earth, the crunching of leaves beneath me, rustling of more all around me in a breeze that brushes against my fur. I pick up something else. *There's water nearby.* I open my eyes, adjusting to the darkness. Light speckles the forest floor around me, through the canopy of trees above me. The ringing in my ears fade out, now filled with the sounds of nature.

I brace myself, and wobble to my feet. I'm… significantly taller than I used to be. My head feels light as I try to stand upright, bile rising to my mouth. I vomit. Searing, acidic pain in my throat as I lose control of my stomach. I reach down and reality hits as the next breeze envelopes my body; I am bare. No fabric to shield me from the elements, not even to clean off the bile. With no other option, I have to clean myself with my arm fur. Disgusting, but I have to make do. My steps are weighted and awkward, like a drunken stumble, as I make my way through some bushes and weave through the trees. There's more light coming up ahead, a soft natural light and not something artificial.

There's nothing around, nothing at all. Just a clearing exposing the surrounding forest, the hauntingly beautiful moon high in the sky the only familiar sight in this place. It's full. Bathing everything in view in beautiful pale light, I look at my hands, gnarled knuckles, matted fur, long fingers with sharp claws. My dark fur, tainted with unkemptness, no doubt my appearance was wild and savage at first glance. A dull longing at the pit of my stomach, an aching for fulfillment, a desire to rip into something. My teeth ached, my tongue craving, saliva barely forming if not for my parched throat. Once I realize the ravenous hunger that overcomes my mind. Looking myself over that became painfully apparent,

What am I?

And it all comes back. The lab, the therapy, the experimental drugs, the lies. They had told me it would help with the memories. They told me I was getting better, even when I could barely get out of bed, to vomit blood that wasn't even my own. To see myself morph into something monstrous. *She* assured me, and I stupidly believed her. I believed everything they fed me like a damn fool. I found out too much, they've thought they'd gotten rid of their new liability. She knew this would happen, and once I discovered the truth, she silenced me. But I'm still alive? Why? What kind of cruel, twisted… a message. It's so obvious. To make me into a freak, to dump me away, to strike out my name in the history books and forget I even existed.

Alexandra did this to me. She said she'd help me. That fucking bitch.

Anger flows through me. No, not that, not even rage. *Wrath* fills my veins as my newfound muscles bulge with fiery vengeance. There's only thought on my mind. *Revenge*. A howl, a hurting pathetic noise escapes my lungs, burning with the emotions of my newfound life. Something, anything, a release of everything building up. Growling, snarling, teeth crashing; needing, yearning to tear apart and destroy. Claws desperate to rake. The blood pumps, my head spins, but my body refuses to give up. Clinging to this life, as it couldn't to my previous. That city, that cursed hell, is somewhere in this forsaken plane; its ruined walls will shake and fucking crumble underneath me. Everyone. Will. Pay.

Who will I carve up first? How many more after? This bloodlust… *it's so invigorating*.

* * *

"Welcome back Louis. Debriefing should be happening right about now. Another one of those things is loose in the city again."

"Yeah, I'm only ever here if there's another monstrosity spotted. Thankfully it's in the city walls, never going beyond again."

The goat shook his head.

"Don't worry, heard the scene's been swept so you're staying well within the borders. Besides, its not like you're going to be the one hunting this thing down."

"I guess… I still don't like any of this."

The doe receptionist gave a polite smile, friendly but well-rehearsed.

"You'll get used to it. It took me a while to get used to being stuck here, let alone realizing I've already died once. Just accept it and move on with your life, it'll do you some good."

"I'll try."

Givig her a nod, she focused her gaze back on her monitor. A bored guard behind another desk was tinkering away at a radio, his crimson eyes darting up once Louis passed by. The two exchanged a half-hearted wave. Satisfied with the interaction, the guard returned his attention to his machine. The receptionist's keyboard typing faded away as Louis made his way down the hallway, hap-hazardly connected wires leading from reception to the main office leading his path in this maze of debris and storage. The distinct sound of droplets hitting buckets of water could be heard throughout the floor, hidden behind shelves and boxes still left over from when the space was used for storage of some kind. Nearly every room was in some combined state of total caved in, or full of junk that passage through was near-impossible.

The old and decaying multi-office building sat in quieter part of the city and in poor condition for the sensitive work they were carrying out. The higher

floors were already exposed and overgrown like many of the buildings outside of the downtown hub. There were only two important rooms in this building after all: reception and the main office space. So long as there was a phone line, and a flat surface to write on, it was a suitable base of operations. At the end of the hallway sat another guard, reading a stack of magazines piled on his desk. His shotgun leaned up against the wall behind him. Louis wondered if he bothered keeping it loaded if there was never anything here. The guard didn't look up as he spoke.

"You're late."

The conversation was always the same, one way or another he'd always do something wrong worthy of a lecture. Even if this time his reasoning was legitimate, he was never allowed anything less than perfection for this guard. His eyes peered over the top of the magazine, looking Louis in the eye.

"Timesheets can lie; this door is hooked up to her ivory tower. She is going to know. I am forgiving, she is not."

An uncomfortably silent moment passed. A heavy sigh left the goat.

"Yeah, I know. I'll deal with it later, just let me in."

The guard waved him off. Fishing out his keycard and scanning it against the reader, a quick beep followed with the flash of green. Soon, the click of the unlocking mechanism, and it was time to enter business mode. He had to admit, it felt very professional and still unreasonably exciting having his own personalized, exclusive identification keycard. An office sealed off to all but a select few eyes. Pushing his spy-thriller fueled fantasies aside, the heavy metal door opened with a sturdy hand. Inside, the office for the department he was a member of. An open space, the bosses office in the corner next to a meeting room, with workspaces messily scattered around the rest of the floor. Lining the wall were archival shelves and bookcases, analogue servers with reels swirling at breakneck speeds, and computer terminals with the largest monochromatic screens. Abandoned desks and tables dotted around the space stacked high with papers once useful and placed "for quick access" eventually grew dusty and forgotten.

In the corner, his team's desks, computers, and cabinets clumped together. Smart hunters gathered intel first before going out, and that's what half their job was. They were all gathered there, waiting for him expectantly, but he had to detour to make first. In the center the heart of the office was in the motions, the domain of the trio. This was the world of the trinity of gods; wrathful, whimsical, and benevolent. Three ferret switchboard operators working their machines with the precision and familiarity that only years of experience could grant. Louis approached, when one of the ferrets noticed him. His bright rust-colored eyes met Louis'; busy on a call he gave a polite smile and waved. Upon receiving one in return, his focus shifted back to his work.

"**Сраный урод.**" the nearby snow-white ferret muttered after disconnecting a call.

The meaning was entirely lost to Louis, but the tone was quite clear. His crimson eyes darted towards , seeing someone entering his sanctuary of telephones. Annoyance was still worn on his face, but seeing the goat approach softened something in his eyes and eased his expression. A soft and worn, but still friendly smile greeted Louis.

"Oh, you finally here," he paused, looking the goat over as he slipped his headset off, "you look more shit than usual.

"Gee, thanks Mikey," the ferret grinned. "You look great yourself."

"Slept like dead."

"Anything new?"

"What changes in this place?" The ferret's ear twitch, "Small men in big suits being assholes. Stuck with all this stupid noise."

"Yep, that's why I'd rather deal with bodies than people."

"How is that for you?" he looked him over, "You look very tired. Very troubled, friend."

A feeling of sudden defensiveness flooded in, having hoped to avoid the

subject.

"They're just trying something new is all. Experimental this, medication that. Can't really sleep. It's just… a lot, you know?" he paused, fingers massaging his forehead, "They say I need more training to better hone my gifts. Test the boundaries of my mind or some sci-fi bullshit, with whatever's wrong with my head. At least I can now look at people in the eye. Better than when I first got here. Woke up I mean."

"You need a break." The ferret shook his head, "they work me like a dog, but they treat you like experiment."

"Yeah man, it sucks but I don't got another choice. We'll talk more when I'm free. Gotta run."

The ferret slipped his headset back on, returning back to his work. Something in him felt tugged at his chest, even if he wanted to he couldn't just go into details while running late. They would have to find time later. A tall wolf stood center, impatiently waiting for Louis to join in the meeting. His coworkers all gave him various looks of impatience. The wolf's own orange eyes narrowed as he stared him down. An uneasy quiet settled, before being broken with a word.

"Louis."

"Sir."

"We don't have the time for late pleasantries. Take your seat."

The others turned their attention back to the wolf, his voice filling the room.

"Earlier today there was another attack. Repairs were being made to the exterior wall when something got in. Killed the maintenance worker and security posted. No survivors, no additional witnesses. Paramedics were able to get a rough description of what happened from one of the men before he bled out. This gives us a lead to where it might've gone. Sarah will investigate the digital leads with the help of the city's surveillance system. Some footage, some photographs, rumors, gossip. It's nothing concrete, but we'll get more information soon."

"Has there been any official statement, or is it covered up again?" Sarah spoke up, her feline tail swishing behind her, "I'd like to know the script so there's no special surprises like last time."

"Nothing official. Bodies got stored away and the scene swept, no one else knows but us and the cleaning crew. You're a journalist needing access for the surveillance. Anyone important already knows not to ask questions."

"Got it."

"Until we know exactly what we're dealing with the rest of us will be on standby. Louis, you're going to check the bodies for their memories. Make sure you know exactly what we're up against, no eyewitnesses left means we are working with nothing right now. Height, weight, capabilities, appearance. There's no telling what or where it, and it doesn't help that the current leads are just boogeyman sightings. Once the gaps of the story are filled we'll start the hunt. Everyone understand?"

The group nodded, mumbling in agreement. The wolf chewed something over momentarily, before speaking again.

"There's one more thing. Alexandra's going to drop by, later tonight."

The collective morale of the group drained. A pit formed in Louis' stomach.

"She's not staying long, but she's personally reviewing the files of the last few hunts. She's been in direct communication with me over this breach, and now will be with the rest of you."

A murmur of acknowledgement.

"That's all. Let's get to it, before we have more bodies piling up."

* * *

One of the most modern-looking buildings in Anderson was the hospital; unlike everything else which was stuck with technology from decades long gone the one area they chose to modernize was medicine. Ironic, as they were all dead and still needed medical attention. Across the top of the building its name: Holy Trinity. These details always pestered Louis, the holding onto religion despite the fact that it was very clearly wrong, or at least they had a gross misunderstanding of the bigger picture. Limbo, this place they're in, practically spat in the face of every known world religion, its existence blasphemous. Maybe this was Purgatory, but then why was there no path to righteousness and just a static grey mockery of life? He shifted uncomfortably in his seat as the train came to a stop. It was all so absurd, that there was a second life after a first, and who knows what's after this one. Despite the undead clustering together to pretend they're still alive, would Death visit again and again until they become whatever those things he helps to hunt? A mindless beast lost in this endless torment?

Passengers were beginning to get up; it was time to leave these existential thoughts behind and do his work. The elevated rail left him a block away from the hospital, a short walk and he was able to meet with reception at the main entrance. Various animals seated around him minded their own business, though some gave him quick curious glances. Magenta was a very rare color, its association with those that were not even supposed to be here. The dead, who were not supposed to die. Unlike the rest of them who's time was up, his was not. Hiding their pity, or jealousy, he continued past them to where he was needed. The blue-eyed boar behind the desk looked over his ID, then with a snort called over security.

"Follow him."

The uniformed jackal took him down some hallways, and towards the back where the service elevator was located away from the public. Into the basement, and down a corridor awaited his objective: the morgue.

"She's inside."

"Thanks."
The jackal left. Nothing but the buzzing of the overhead lights and the occasional footsteps or rolling of gurneys interrupting his uneasy quiet. He wasn't bothered by the sight of bodies, they often were cleaned up by staff, but the re-

cent extractions have been getting significantly more graphic. Past the swinging doors, a cold and sterile setting greeted him. Maddison was already waiting for him inside, gathering tools and playing them on a rolling tray. Three bodies under white linen surrounded her, this case was no different. These things always made a mess upon entry into the city.

"Hey Louis," as she turned her head to meet his eyes, "About time. They died waiting for you. Sorry but you're out of luck."

Louis rolled his eyes, the nurse smiling.

"These three are from the recent attack."

As Louis approached the nearest body, she uncovered him.

"This here is Edwin Alverez. Male tiger, approximately 45 from first death, private security for the interior wall. His partner was also found, Liel Banters, 42 male lion. The other is Fred Jackson. Male dog mix, 38, maintenance worker for the exterior wall. Story is that Fred was attacked while doing repairs. The screams alerted Edwin and his partner. They engaged with whatever it was, Liel was torn apart, Edwin mortally wounded. He died shortly after paramedics made it to the scene which is why we know just about the bare minimum of what happened."

She motioned towards the other body.

"If you think memory-mind sweeping… whatever you do to Fred or Liel would be helpful go ahead, but Edwin here would give you a clearer picture since he wasn't snuck up on or torn to shreds. Once you're done, you know where the phone is. Look through the files if you need to, the transcripts of a distress call and the Edwins brief report are there. Gloves are in the cabinet."

"Thanks, but they interfere."`

"Right… suit yourself. Question for you, before I go."
Louis gave her a curious look.

"So, how much worse is this going to get until things get better? This is the

third attack this month. I've seen more mauling like this in the past few months than my three years here."

"I've only been here for a few months. I really don't know what the norm is or was. I got thrown into this, so I know just as much as you do."

"Humph. Maybe you're the bad omen."

"Really?"

"Well, if they tell you anything let me know. I'm getting tired of having to clean up all these messes just to be kept in the dark. Be seeing you again."

She took an empty cart and left the room. The wheels faintly squeaked further away until all he could hear was the overhead buzz of lights. Looking at the bodies, pity flashed across his mind. Their second death, hopefully their final, caused by some freak encounter with a monster that mauled them senseless. Perhaps there was somewhere better out there that this place was keeping them from, no one really knows. Vague emotions, distant memories, the only things he can piece together from the time between his death and waking up here not even a year ago. Who knew how much time passed since he died in 2017. Not that it mattered now, he'd rather have a second chance at life, even if he was technically undead, than face an unknown oblivion.

His attention snapped back to his job, making way towards the head of the tiger. His hands hovered over his eyes as his heart began to thumb in anticipation. He had to get into the right headspace which always proved a challenge, though his hands did not shake anymore. Lowering his hands for fur-on-fur contact, Louis closed his eyes and steadied his breathing. The low buzz of fluorescent lights was the only hint of an outside reality, any noises beyond fading away, until the buzz itself was muted. All that existed now was Louis, and the deceased tiger.

Edwin. Tell me your secrets, Edwin Alvarez. Your memories, your soul, the last moments.

In his mind, blood began to rush through empty veins, lungs filling with air once again, a sudden heartbeat in a cold chest. Then, another. Blood flowed where it once stopped, in their separate reality. His chest rose, mind buzzing with

activity once more. The dead woke a second time, in the memories of their most recent death.

* * *

Darkness all around. The ambience coming to life, bringing forth Edwin's memory. My first sense to greet me: the sounds. A lazy breeze through the overgrown urban vegetation, low radio static, shuffling of paper. Smaller, cards? Next, smell. Cigarette smoke, ash, sweat. The numbness around me gave way to chill air, my fingertips the last to have the pins and needles fade away. Blood pumping, heart beating, chest rising and falling, tail twitching. All signs of life. A false second life. My vision became less of a blur as my eyes adjusted to the incoming light. A voice, loud and deep.

"I said you owe me twenty bucks."

I blinked away the fog, my eye focusing on a lion clad in body armor. He seemed middle aged, his stern eyes a deep purple which cut through the darkness around us. We're both sitting around an overturned crate, cards laid out before them. Bottles of A single dim light hung from its cord above us, illuminating the scene. Strange surrounds.

"You good man? You're spacing out on me mid game. Don't tell me that cig was laced with some of that cheap street shit."

I nod, closing my eyes. I hunch over, elbows on my knees,

"You lost a hand don't start crying now. Hey, can you hear me?"

Breathe.

Cold air fills my lungs, and I hold it. This is not my body, this is not my memory, this is not my death. The blood that flows through my veins isn't mine, the heart beating isn't either. What I'm feeling isn't real, who I am is severed from Edwin. I am not Edwin, I am Louis.

"Ed!"

A rough shove at my arm.

"Come on man, what are-"

Focus. This is not my end, this is his. Tune out this world. My head feels light, as I hear a second heartbeat. Then the ringing begins, and finally the numbing vibration at the base of my brain. Like some terrible migraine. The high-pitched ringing, drowning out anything and everything as my mind and heart race. And on cue, my muscles tense up and I stand upright, as if shocked. Leaping from my chest, I split, and my soul severs itself from the memory of Edwin.

"W-what? The fuck?"

"Ed? What's wrong with you? You're not high on duty again, are you?"

"No, I just… I don't know I didn't feel like myself."

"Well, great to hear you're back with me in this shithole. You still owe me $20."

I watch their exchange for a moment, then look beyond. We're by the interior wall, maybe a good hundred feet. It keeps the inhabited ruins of Anderson inside, and the overgrown ruins out. There's not that much of a difference, honestly, the out and in. We're just easier to control if we're sectioned off. I've only been this far a few times, most of them within a memory like this. You could just see the forest from this tower, and from them is what probably spawned what I'm looking for. These thoughts could wait, I had to reel my attention back to my work, and as if on cue, a scream. Muffled, gargling, pained. It was coming from below, from a small building incorporated into the wall. It was undeniable, a short scream, and then the silence followed

"What the fuck…?"

"Fuck, isn't the maintenance guy down there?"

In a moment of silence, minds racing no doubt, their eyes widened.

"Fuck, FUCK!"

The two sputtered some more cursed and hurried to their equipment. Their heavy boots being flung on and bodies racing down to the staircase. The ground below isn't far. I stare for a moment. I close my eyes and breathe, imagining myself there. The surroundings warp, I can feel it even if I can't see it. Fading away, into something else. I open my eyes. I'm below them, scrambling to the staircase that wraps itself around their makeshift watchtower. There's a door not too far from here that the scream came from. The back entrance to a building that was incorporated into the wall's structure. There's muffled grunts and groans coming from inside, Edwin's perception barely able to pick up on it through the adrenaline rushing through his body, and no doubt his heat beating in his ears.

I try the handle, the door opening without resistance. Inside is a blur of grey shapes and lights, Edwin hasn't seen the inside yet. The noise doesn't get any louder, and nothing can really be seen, so I just shut the door and take a few steps back. The two security sprint closer, weapons raised, flanking the door. A massive body shuffles inside, audible raspy breaths and drips of something wet. The two men are on either side of the door, waiting. The moving stops, everyone stops, the world stops. It's unnaturally quiet, for a few moments.

I wait, listening, taking in every little detail. Just out of the way to be able to see most of the scene play out. Liel shifts, reaching for the door handle as Edwins levels his weapon. No one is making a sound, the only noise the faint taps of his claws on the metal handle. Following this, a low growl. Feral. Before the pair could breach the building the door is violently flung open with an immense force, knocking into Liel and pinning him against the exterior wall. A massive blur of black pounces Edwin and pins him to the ground, the speed causing me to flinch backwards. It scream in his face, fully drowning out his own, dark saliva covering his face. It was pure darkness, its fur blending into the poorly lit surroundings. It's head was off, the horns didn't match, and its face seemed emaciated, skeletal even. These things, they had to be demons. Supernatural abominations. This one had to be sent by the devil.

And its eyes.

Those fucking eyes.

These were different. They were like mine. Magenta, another cursed with memories. I've never seen one of these things have anything like that before. My stomach churned, I felt like I had to throw up, but remained on my feet. I needed to see this to the end. It's wild eyes stared into Edwin's soul, seemingly looking over his military security uniform, before a low growl escaped it. It wasn't attacking, not again. Was it planning something? Was this thing… contemplating?

Crack.

It doesn't last long as bullets rip through the air. Liel had freed himself and began showering hellfire onto this creature. Blood splatters across the grass and concrete beneath them as an enraged screech overcoming all other sounds. Its claws dig into Edwin as its gaze locks onto Liel. It leaps off, becoming a blue once again. Liel shoots, but it continues to close the distance, eventually slamming its massive body into him against the wall. It happens in a moment, but the sickening crack of a body against a wall makes no mistake of what has happened. It's hands tear the barely held weapon from his hands, teeth and claws beginning to tear into the lion's body. No screams, no noise, just a barely audible escape of breath. Not even able to react to his death before it arrived.

What the fuck am I looking at?

Edwin scrambled towards his gun, the creature finishing its mauling of Liel. Blood painted the wall and grass, labored heavy breaths escaping this monstrosity. I couldn't look at the body, bile already moving up hearing how this thing devoured the lion.

"Die fucker!"

More gunshots, Edwin unaware of how it would end. A few more shorts made it into the unaware beast, but it quickly rerouted its attention to him. Claws raked through his armor, blood splattering everywhere around him. It didn't kill him. It left him there, desperately trying to keep the blood pouring out of his body inside him. It just stood there, taking in the scene. It straightened its back, fucking hell it must be over seven foot tall. It just kept looked as the blood overflowed from his gritted teeth, sirens beginning to make themselves heard in the distance. I take a step closer, thoroughly looking over this thing. I was right, it was a mismatch of several animals. But how?

It was completely covered in matted and mangled black fur, extending down to its tail The right antler was a deer's, the left a split horn of a goat. It's face was gaunt, its nose missing. It was just the bare, skeletal remains of what should've been the tip of a snout. Its sharp teeth glistened with blood dripping down the side of its face. Nothing of its body made sense, it seemed to have arms too long for its body, even lanky, but powerful. Its breathing began to slow down, turning its attention away from the dying man. Cutting through the empty fields, it held its head up as it traveled through the shadows. The industrial zone, still keeping close to the wall.

So that's how this happened? Screaming, gunfire, the spilling of blood on the grass and concrete. Death would come soon. Footsteps run closer, frantic calls to a radio, cursing, more gunfire, more running. Always trying to stave it off, but the end always edges closer. The world around me blurs, consciousness fading out. Sirens, ambulances, police, desperate attempts to stop what little blood is left in the body from escaping further. A few mumbled words, trying to grasp at the reality of what just happened. No one can fully understand what happened. It's too much at once, too much for a failing body. The memory flickers out, and Edwin's light is extinguished once again.

COMICS

A STONER FANTASY WEIRD TALE

DRAWN AND WRITTEN BY AZON BOBCAT

"Why does it look so bad?"

A Quick Junkie Paladin Preface by Azon Bobcat

Before you begin reading this comic, I have to give an explanation on it's "unique look". To be honest right form the beginning - *I simply ran out of time to make it look finished.*

Ironically, the guy who was the angriest about not being able to finish anything was the one who did not finish his own work. However, I would have to say that the story itself is fully finished and most of the storytelling visuals are there, I just had to make a decision to either leave it in this rough state, but tell a finished story, or to have an unfinished story but with pretty visuals, I decided to choose a story over visuals.

Usually there are crisp inked lines and, if you are lucky, colors in a comic, but at this moment there are only raw pencilled pages shaded with screen-tone dots. Its a unique look, but its all I could do to finish it on time.

This is my largest comic yet and I'm surprised I was even able to write, plan out and draw it fully. My script file self-destructed itself when I was halfway through with it, so I had to rewrite the whole thing from memory. Never using WordPad ever again.

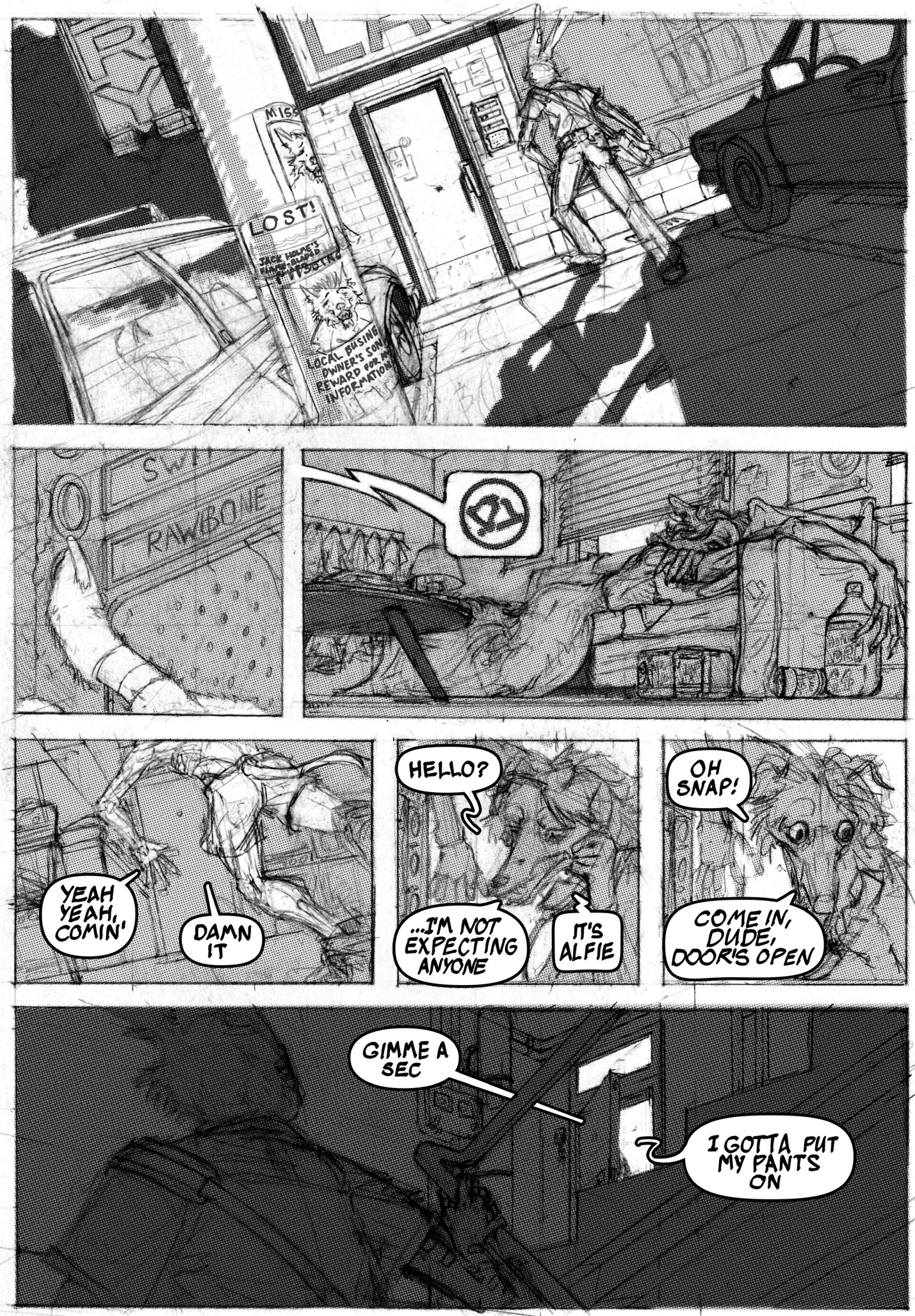
For these that would dislike this approach to visuals: do not worry, I will eventually ink and color this thing and release it in some form properly. As for now, you have a unique behind the scenes look at a pencilled but not inked version of my art.

Either way, I hope you *enjoy*.

You and I went down to the ocean
You and I stared at the sea
Where we gonna go when colossus comes
Things will change yeah who you gonna be

"Colossus"
Lightning Bolt

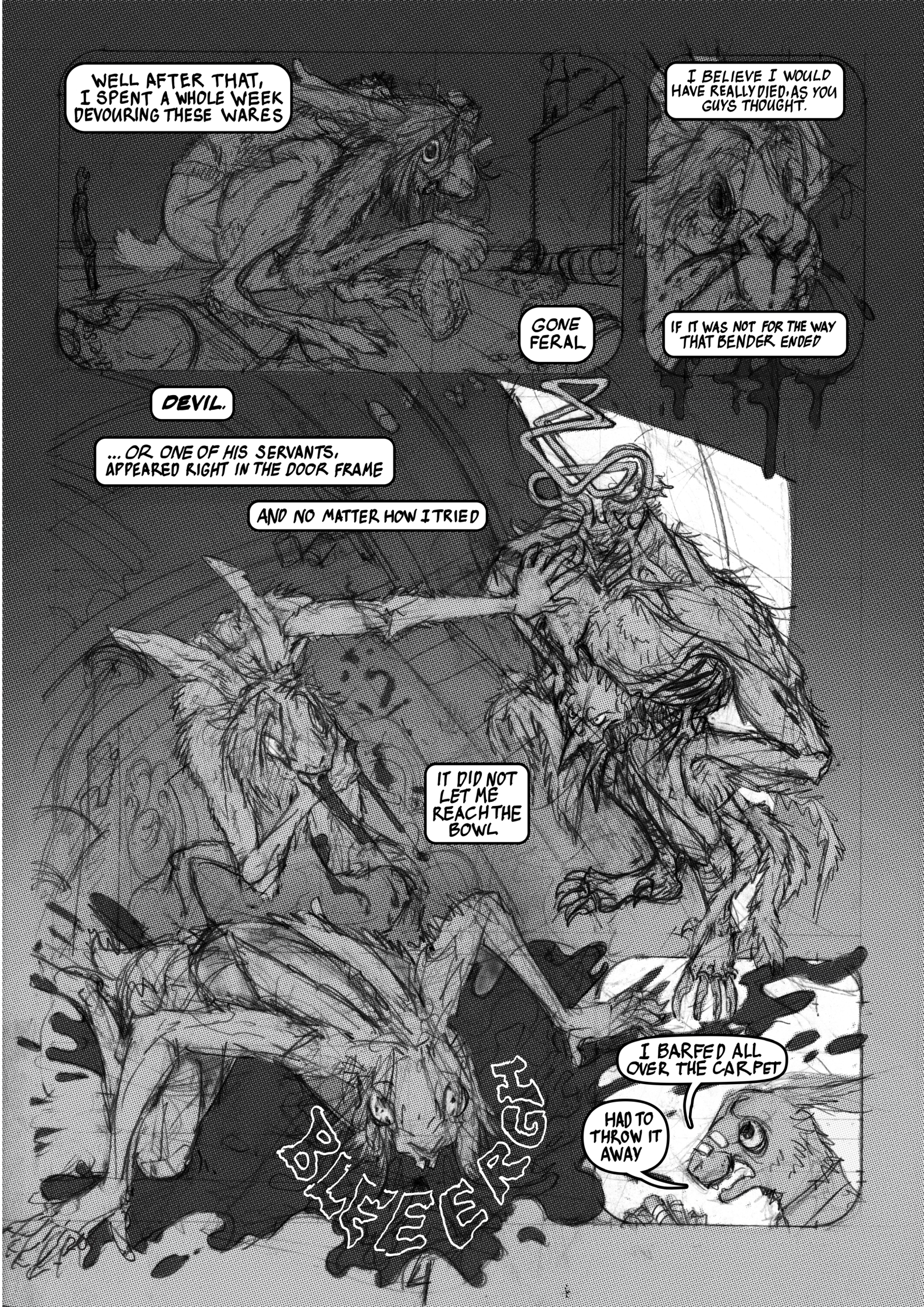
This tale takes place in New England.
Sometime between 1969 and 2012


LOST!
LOCAL BUSING OWNER'S SON
SWI
RAWBONE
@!
YEAH YEAH, COMIN'
DAMN IT
HELLO?
...I'M NOT EXPECTING ANYONE
IT'S ALFIE
OH SNAP!
COME IN, DUDE, DOOR'S OPEN
GIMME A SEC
I GOTTA PUT MY PANTS ON

JESUS SAVES
COME IN
HELLO, GUIN
WADDUP, MAN! THE BOYS AND I STARTED TO THINK THAT YOU HAD KICK~
GODDAMN, WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?
WELL...
GOT IN TO A FIGHT WITH MY OLD LADY THE OTHER DAY
ARE YOU STILL WITH BARBARA?
YEA
WE EVEN GOT ENGAGED
WOAH, COOL

SO THEN
... IT WAS HER WHO WRANGLED YOU IN SO HARD THAT YOU DON'T HANG WITH US ANYMORE?
UGH
OOOH NO, SHE HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THAT
I FOUND GOD, GUIN
JESUS SAVES
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
EIGHT MONTHS AGO I FOUND OUT THAT MY UNCLE MIGUEL PASSED AWAY, AND LEFT ME THREE GRAND AND HIS VINTAGE CARPET FROM SPAIN
I IMMEDEATELY SPENT All THAT MONEY ON THE BEST THINGS THAT BRAD SOLD, GOD BLESS HIS SOUL
YEAH
WE ARE STILL LOOKING FOR HIM

3


WELL AFTER THAT, I SPENT A WHOLE WEEK DEVOURING THESE WARES
I BELIEVE I WOULD HAVE REALLY DIED, AS YOU GUYS THOUGHT.
GONE FERAL
IF IT WAS NOT FOR THE WAY THAT BENDER ENDED
DEVIL.
... OR ONE OF HIS SERVANTS, APPEARED RIGHT IN THE DOOR FRAME
AND NO MATTER HOW I TRIED
IT DID NOT LET ME REACH THE BOWL
I BARFED ALL OVER THE CARPET
HAD TO THROW IT AWAY
BLEEEG

DAMN, THATS HARDCORE.
I'M NOT JUDGING. I THINK I'D ALSO STRAIGHT UP TURN IN TO A MONK IF SOME BULLSHIT LIKE THAT HAPPENED TO ME.
YOU WANT SOME COFFEE?
YEA
I ASSUME YOU ARE ALSO UPSET ABOUT BRAD?
YEAH, DON'T EVEN START
YOU HANG OUT WITH YOU'R HOMIE, WHOM YOU HAVE KNOWN SINCE SCHOOL. AND YOU EXPECT THAT FRIENDSHIP TO LAST 'TILL THE END OF YOUR LIFE
BUT NO
HE REALLY CHANGED IN JUST A FEW MONTHS. WE HUNG OUT LESS AND LESS, BECAUSE HE WOULD DISSAPEAR ALL THE TIME AND THEN WOULD NOT EVEN TELL ANYONE WHERE HE WAS.
MISSING
THEN HE SUDDENLY THROWS A PARTY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SUMMER. INVITED ALL OF US, MAYBE EVEN TRIED TO CALL YOU AS WELL. ANYWAY, WE THOUGHT IT WAS SOME KIND OF A DEPRESSIVE EPISODE AND IT FINALLY ENDED WITH THAT PARTY...
...BUT NO

DAMN!
IN SHORT, THINGS WENT SOUTH REAL FAST
COPS, QUESTIONINGS, SUSPECTING EVERYONE YOU KNOW
ANOTHER PROBLEM WHICH IS PULLING UP ON US REAL FAST – IT LOOKS LIKE SOON ALL OF US WILL HAVE TO GO CLEAN LIKE YOU
YOU DON'T TAKE ANYTHYNG ANYMORE, RIGHT?
I DON'T
NOT EVEN CIGS?
NOT EVEN CIGS.
OK
SINCE BRAD WENT MISSING, WE LOST OUR ONLY CONTACT WITH HOCHELAGA
AND NONE OF US WANTS TO EVEN BE IN THE SAME POSTAL CODE AS THAT OLD CREEP
SORRY, I'M OUT OF CREAMER, HELP YOURSELF TO THE SUGAR IN THE BAG
I THINK I MIGHT BE ABLE TO HELP WITH THAT
WITH CREAMER?
NO...
SLAM
AIN'T NO WAY...

6

SNIFF
YOU STILL HAVE SOME LEFT !?
WAIT A SEC, ISN'T IT AGAINST YOUR BELIEFS OR WHATEVER?
...OR THE COPS ARE GONNA BREAK DOWN MY DOOR NOW!?
NO NO, CALM DOWN...
YOU CAN KEEP THAT BAG, AND THEN EVEN SOME, IF YOU HELP ME FIND BRAD
THIS IS STILL WITHIN MY BELIEFS
AH SO YOU DO WORK FOR COPS THEN!
WOULD YOU LEAVE THE COPS ALONE ALREADY? THEY HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH THIS
SLAM
POLICE HAD SHOWN THEMSELVES TO BE VERY INCOMPETENT WHEN IT COMES TO HELPING PEOPLE LIKE US
WELL OKAY, EVEN AT THAT, WHAT CAN WE DO WHAT COPS AND SEARCH GROUPS CAN'T?
WHY DID YOU COME TO ME INSTEAD OF, SAY, JUSTIN OR BOB?

BECAUSE YOU RUN THE BEST OUT OF THEM ALL. IF SOMETHING HAPPENS TO ME,
CAN I GET ANOTHER CUP?
UHH, YEA, GIMME A MINUTE
THANKS
IT WOULD BE MUCH EASIER FOR YOU TO GET OUT OF TROUBLE UNHARMED AND THEN TELL OTHERS IF SOMETHING HAPPENED TO ME
SO, HOW DANGEROUS IS THIS SHEBANG, IF YOU THINK THAT I WOULD HAVE TO RUN? IF IT'S ALL ALL ABOUT SOME KIND OF ORGANISED GANGS, WITH WHOM BRAD MIGHT HAVE HAD TROUBLE.
THEN I WOULD IMAGINE THE COPS WOULD TAKE UP THAT CASE EVEN IF THEY DON'T WANT TO HELP PEOPLE LIKE US
IF YOU DON'T WISH TO POTENTIALLY GET IN TROUBLE, THEN I'll THANK YOU FOR THE COFFEE. TAKE BACK MY GRASS AND WILL NOT BOTHER YOU AGAIN
BUT IF YOU WOULD LISTEN TO ME TO THE END, THEN YOU CAN HAVE THAT BAG EVEN RIGHT NOW. AND YOU AGREE TO JOIN ME IN SEARCH, THEN I'LL GIVE YOU ANOTHER ONE JUST AS BIG, PLUS WHATEVER OTHER MIND NUMBING CRAP I STILL HAVE
UHHH...
ALRIGHT I'M LISTENING

IT'S A SPIRITUAL TASK
WHAT?
I THINK YOU HAVE NOTICED THAT EVER SINCE BRAD'S DAD WROTE HIM OUT OF HIS WILL, BRAD WAS KINDA "NOT ALL THERE"
NO MATTER HOW MUCH HE SMOKED, HE STILL COULD NOT RELAX
STOPPED STUTTERING AT LEAST
ALWAYS YAPPED ABOUT HOW THE WHOLE WORLD OWES HIM
HE ATE LESS...
...DRANK MORE...
OH YEAH, YOU ARE RIGHT, IT WAS MUCH WORSE AFTER YOU DISAPPEARED
HE LOOKED LIKE HE AGED ONE YEAR EACH MONTH

YEA. AND HE PROBABLY DID NOT SHUT UP ABOUT "ABSOLUTE POWER" AND HOW HE WILL "SHOW THEM ALL"?
OH YOU CAN'T EVEN IMAGINE!
LIKE, STRAIGHT UP, DURING LAST WEEKS BEFORE HE STOPPED HANGING OUT WITH US, IT FELT LIKE HE ONLY CAME TO OUR HANGOUTS JUST TO ENLIST US IN TO SOME KIND OF HIS OWN SELF-MADE CULT OF REVENGE AGAINST LITERALLY EVERYBODY...
STARTING WITH HIS BULLIES FROM THE SECOND GRADE AND ENDING WITH~
...OH GOD
YOU DON'T SAY THAT HE BECAME A TERRORIST?
NO
I'M AFRAID IT'S MUCH SCARIER THAN THAT
BRAD IS POSESSED BY WICKED SPIRITS
ALRIGHT MAN, BEFORE YOU CONTINUE
I WILL TAKE ADVANTAGE OF YOUR GENERO--SITY AND HAVE A SMOKE
THIS CONVERSATION IS GETTING AWFULLY HEAVY

BRAD TAKES DRUGS SINCE HE WAS THIRTEEN. HIS PHYSICAL CHANGES COULD NOT HAVE BEEN CAUSED BY TAKING THE SAME THING THAT HE USUALLY TAKES
YEA. AND HE WOULD HAVE YAPPED ABOUT TAKING SOMETHING NEW FOR DAYS
HE NEVER COULD RESIST BRAGGING ABOUT SOMETHING NEW FROM HOCHELAGA
NOTICE THAT CONVERSATIONS ABOUT REVENGE STARTED AT THE SAME TIME AS HIS PHYSICAL CHANGES
RRRIP
IT STARTED EVEN WHEN I WAS AROUND
RRIP
SPIRIT POSESSION IS ALSO USUALLY FOLLOWED BY MENTAL AND PHYSICAL CHANGES
THE SPIRIT CAN'T CONTAIN ITS DESIRES FOR TOO LONG...
EVERY MINUTE ON EARTH IS EUPHORIA IN COMPARISON TO THE UNENDING SUFFERING OF HELL
HELL?
CHIRK
OUCH!
YES, WICKED SPIRIT IS A DEMON
DAMN, THAT WAS WAS THE LAST ONE
I BELIEVE THAT THEY CAN'T FIND BRAD BECAUSE HE NO LONGER LOOKS LIKE BRAD
—
CHRIST SENT DEMONS IN TO THE BODIES OF PIGS AND THEY DROWNED, SINCE THEN NO DEMON CAN KEEP THE WORDLY APPEARANCE OF HIS VICTIMS FOR TOO LONG

HOLD UP A SEC, I THINK I SAW SOMETHING LIKE THAT
DANG, WHERE IS IT?
AH, RIGHT!
YEAH SEE, THEY PRINTED ABOUT A SIMILAR THING IN OUR TOWN
REALLY?

12

"ECORCHAT – FACT OR TAXIDERMY FICTION? STORY ON PAGE 56"
CHIRK
CKHIRK
PAGE FIFTY SIX IS MISSING
CHIRK
DAMN

Imagine a situation: regular evening after a day out hunting, you are walking back to your lodge or a vehicle with a successful catch or a kill. Nothing strange, you just came back a bit later than usual. Suddenly air becomes filled with a noxious miasma, as the darkness thickens and regular sounds of the forest fall silent. A scratching sound, a ruble following…

Before you stands a grotesque creature, stuck between text-books about our extinct ancestors and a children's horror story - Naked and gaunt anthropomorphic figure, unnaturally placed back on all fours like a primitive beast, face contorted in to a grin akin to a felid scull.

This is Ecorchat (French for Flayed Cat) - name given to this creature by French Canadians.

Legends spanning from Maryland to Quebec say - Ecorchat is a body of a person possessed by demons. Other variations of the legend say that these are only servants of a demon, doing its work on the Earth, where the demon itself can not, or does not have a right to, be present personally. A more morbid variation claims that these creatures are actively preparing preferred conditions for the summoning of a demon, or even the Devil himself, by causing discord and despair among the denizens of these places where Ecorchat chooses to live.

But is this true? Modern Mountain-man Editorial does not believe so. However, some of our readers (a minority, we hope) think oppositely. Sammy D. from New Hampshire sent us numerous photos (opposite page, also on the cover, used with the permission of the author), which presumably capture a taxidermy piece [illegible] out of Ecorchats head. Ph[illegible]oto was made in an antique shop and made o[illegible] the end of the previous century. Johnny M. from the town of Tuftford, also the shopkeeper claims that it is dated to be made in genuinely believes in the existence of such beast. He writes that strange happenings began in the Trojan Forest, located within the town of Tuftford: homeless people are disappearing, children began to avoid going through it, and hunters, who scout out for the autumn season, report an awful odor which can be sensed around a big area of the forest, but which has no direct source either, unlike how it would be in case of a mass prey death. Are these claims true or are they just coincidences assembled together by a bunch of superstitious simpletons? To figure this out, we interviewed an expert in New England fauna

An artist rendition of a person, or an animal, known as Ecorchat.

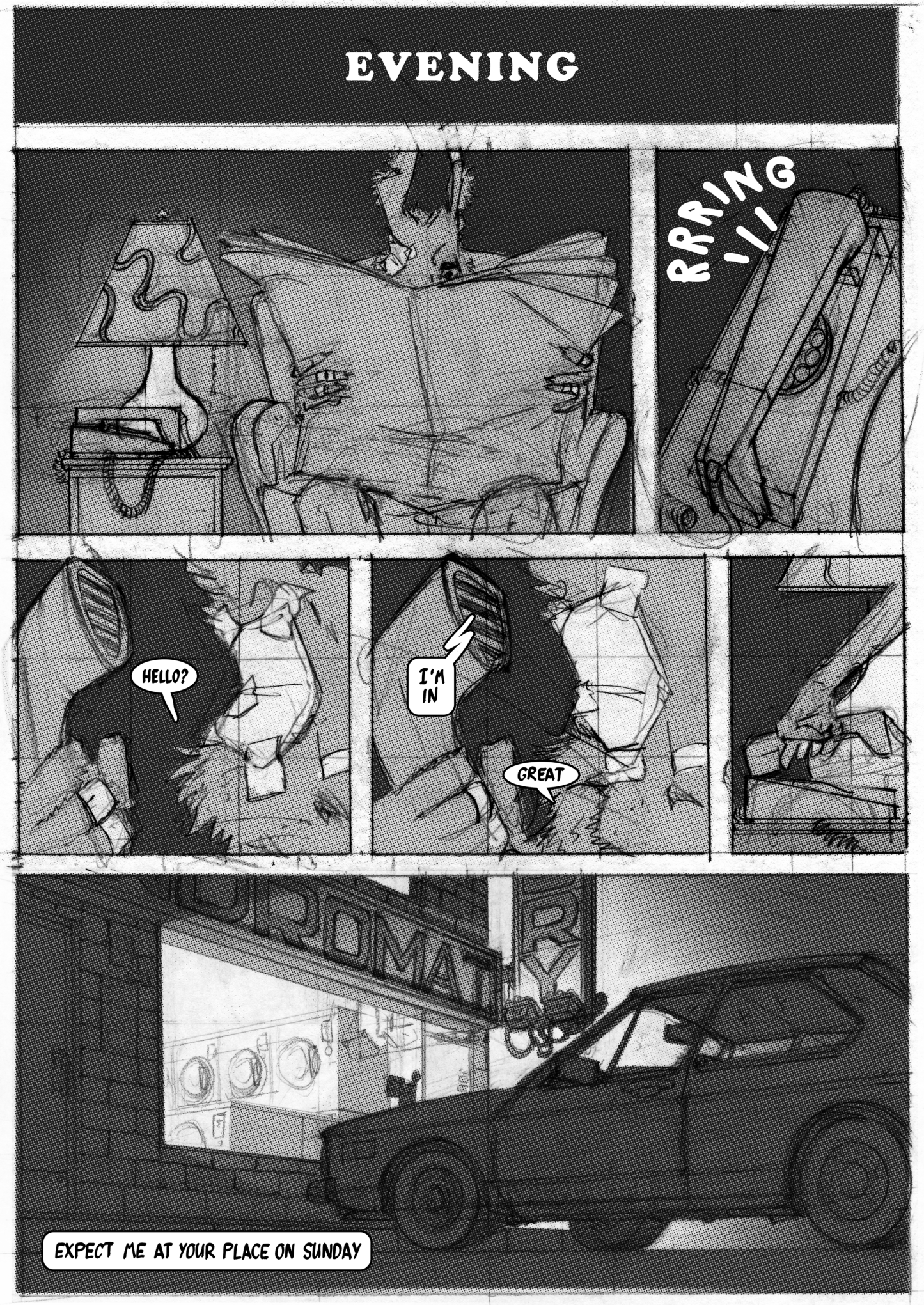
TUFTFORD, FOR REAL
YEA
AND THE SAME THING ABOUT DEMONS AND STUFF
TROJAN FOREST, THATS RIGHT NEAR BRADS FOLKS' HOME
YEA, HE DISAPPEARED RIGHT AFTER THE PARTY AT THE END OF JULY. BY THE WAY, HIS GIRLFRIEND LIVES ON THE OTHER SIDE
I THOUGHT MARY LIVED ON WASHINGTON STREET
NOT MARY, HE GOT ANOTHER ONE — LUCY. SHE'S A RACCOON. LIVES NEAR THE SCHOOL
TROJAN FOREST
AHH, OKAY
SO, IT TURNS OUT THE FOREST IS LOCATED RIGHT IN-BETWEEN HIS HOUSE, AND HIS GIRLFRIEND'S, AND IN THIS SAME FOREST PEOPLE ARE COMPLAINING ABOUT BAD SMELLS AND HOMELESS PEOPLE ARE DISAPPEARING
ALRIGHT, SO ACCORDING TO YOUR THEORY BRAD GOT POSSESSED BY A DEMON, AND NOW LIVES IN A FOREST WHERE HE EATS HOBOS?
YES, IT COULD BE LIKE THAT

DAMN, HOW COME HE TURNED FROM WOLF IN TO A CAT THEN
POSSESSION LEADS TO CHANGES — FIRST ON THE INSIDE, THEN ON THE OUTSIDE
BUT WHAT IF YOU ARE WRONG ?
WELL THEN ...

... BRAD IS GOING THROUGH THE WILDEST TRIP IN HIS LIFE, AND HE DESPERATELY NEEDS HELP FROM HIS GOOD FRIENDS
SMACK
AHH-HA HA-HAH HA!
"IT TAKES ONE TO KNOW ONE"
I DON'T THINK OUR HONORABLE DEFENDERS OF ORDER HAVE ANY FOR--MER OR PRACTICING JUNKIES IN THEIR EMPLOYMENT
THEY HAVE NO IDEA WHERE TO LOOK AND WHO TO ASK, AND WE BASICALLY ALREADY FOUND HIM WITHOUT LEAVING THIS ROOM
I NEED A SMOKE

ANYWAY, DUDE, I HAVE TO LEAVE NOW
CALL ME UP IF YOU AGREE TO HELP ME WITH THIS WHOLE THING
AH, YEA, LET ME HELP YOU TO THE DOOR
SEE YOU AROUND. I WILL CALL ONCE I MAKE UP MY MIND
IT WAS NICE MEETING YOU AGAIN
YEAH... GLAD YOU ARE STILL ALIVE, HE-HE
MOST LIKELY, WE WILL NOT FIND ANYTHYNG
BUT YOU WILL STILL GET YOUR SHARE FOR JOINING
THINK ABOUT IT

18


EVENING
RRRING !!!
HELLO?
I'M IN
GREAT
LAUNDROMAT
EXPECT ME AT YOUR PLACE ON SUNDAY

YO, SICK GETUP
THANKS
PERMIT
HEY, WHAT'S THIS FOR

WILD BOARS LOVE THE SMELL OF MELTED STYROFOAM
IF WE STUMBLE UPON COPS, WE'LL TELL THEM THAT WE ARE HUNTING BOARS — IT'S OPEN SEASON FOR INVASIVE SPECIES
HERE'S THE REST OF MY CRAP
THANK YOU FOR AGREENG TO HELP
OOOOOHHH YEEEEAAAH
JUST TWO THINGS
PERSONAL USE ONLY
SHARE IT WITH FRIENDS BUT DON'T SELL TO ANYBODY
IN NO CASE WILL YOU EVER GIVE ANY OF IT TO CHILDREN
NAAAH, MAN, WHO DO YOU TAKE ME FOR, HOCHELAGA? NEVER
WELL
WE SHOULD BE MOVING THEN

21

YA' KNOW, THIS ONE QUESTION HASN'T LEFT MY MIND ALL WEEK...
WHAT ARE WE GONNA DO IF WE FIND HIM AND HE IS IN THIS SCARY-ASS STATE ?
WELL...
NOT MANY DEMONS CAN STAND AGAINST THE CHRIST'S NAME...
...AND THE SYMBOL OF HIS SACRIFICE FOR OUR SALVATION
BUT WHAT IF...
IT STANDS~
YO, WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?

SECOND GUN. IN CASE COPS ASK WHY I NEED A SECOND UNARMED GUY WITH ME
I DON'T THINK THAT WE ARE DEALING WITH SUCH A POWERFUL SPIRIT, BECAUSE ALL OF THESE ARE PROBABLY TOO BUSY POSSESSING POLITICIANS DOWN IN D.C....
OR MAYBE IN IRAN, OR SOMEWHERE ELSE MORE INTERESTING THAN A SMALL TOWN CALLED TUFTFORD
YEA, IF I WERE A DEMON, I'D ALSO CHOOSE A TARGET MORE IMPORTANT THAN BRAD
BUT WHAT IF IT'S NOT SPIRITS BUT DRUGS? WHAT ARE WE GONNA DO IF HE WENT CRAZY, AND, UHHH, GONE FERAL?
WELL, THAT MIGHT BE DIFFICULT, BUT THAT'S WHY I BROUGHT YOU ALONG
CLICK
"EVEN IN HEAVEN, THERE ARE ANGELS CARRYING SAVAGE WEAPONS"
WE WILL MAKE HIM AFRAID, PEOPLE ARE MISSING WITHOUT ANY SOUNDS OF GUNFIRE, THAT MEANS HE IS NOT ARMED. EVEN UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF PSYCHOSIS HE WILL BE AFRAID TO DIE
WHAT IF HE SOMEHOW GETS A HOLD OF YOUR GUN?
OR IF IT'S NOT HIM AT ALL BUT SOMEONE ELSE?
OR YOU'D GET TOO AFRAID AND SHOOT WHEN YOU SHOULD NOT?

23

THAT'S WHY YOU ARE HERE
CLICK
IT'S NOT LOADED, YOU CARRY THE AMMO
IF SOMETHING HAPPENS, I'll THROW YOU THE GUN
THERE AIN'T ANY PROFIT FOR YOU IN ALL THIS SINCE YOU ALREADY HAVE YOUR CUT
AND THEN YOU'D BE ABLE TO EITHER FIGHT OR FLEE, I WOULD NOT DECIDE ON THAT PART FOR YOU
IF THINGS GET TOO OUT OF HAND YOU WILL HAVE TO RUN AS FAR AS YOU CAN
WHAT, YOU WANT ME TO LEAVE YOU FOR DEAD NOW?
AND NO COP IN SIGHT, WHAT LUCK!
NO. IF WE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO HELP HIM, AT LEAST ONE OF US WILL HAVE TO COME BACK AND TELL THE PUBLIC WHAT'S ACTUALLY GOING ON HERE
WE HAVE ARRIVED
HEY, WAIT
YOU THINK I WILL LEAVE A FRIEND WHOM I HAVEN'T SEEN FOR MONTHS, AND AN ANOTHER FRIEND WHOM I KNEW SINCE SCHOOL?

SO, FRIENDS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN GRASS AFTER ALL?
OF COURSE
WHAT'S THE POINT OF GETTING HIGH IF YOU CAN'T SHARE IT?
I AM GLAD THAT YOU REALLY THINK SO
MAYBE YOUR ADDICTION CLOUDED MY OPINION OF YOU TOO MUCH. IN THAT CASE YOU HAVE EVEN MORE REASONS TO GET AWAY FROM DANGER ONCE YOU GET A CHANCE TO
DAMNATIO MEMORIAE
ME AND BRAD WILL CEASE TO EXIST IF THERE WILL BE NO ONE TO TELL OUR STORY – IF YOU LOVE US AS FRIENDS, YOU SHOULD COME BACK UNHARMED
I CAN TAKE CARE OF MYSELF
DON'T WORRY

MUST BE HERE. YOUR NOSE IS BETTER THAN MINE – DO YOU SMELL ANYTHYNG?
YEAH, SMELLS LIKE...
COINS, AND...
... GRANDMA'S FRIDGE

BLOOD, AND ROT...
LOOKS LIKE THE MAGAZINE DID NOT LIE
PASS ME THE THERMOS
DON'T BE ALARMED, BUT WE HAVE TO DRINK THIS FIRST
AWW YEAH!
I SEE EVEN ABSTINENCE CAN'T SAVE YOU FROM A COUPLE GULPS OF LIQUID COURAGE
GEE EH
WHAT IS THIS SLUDGE?
MOONSHINE OR SOMETHING?

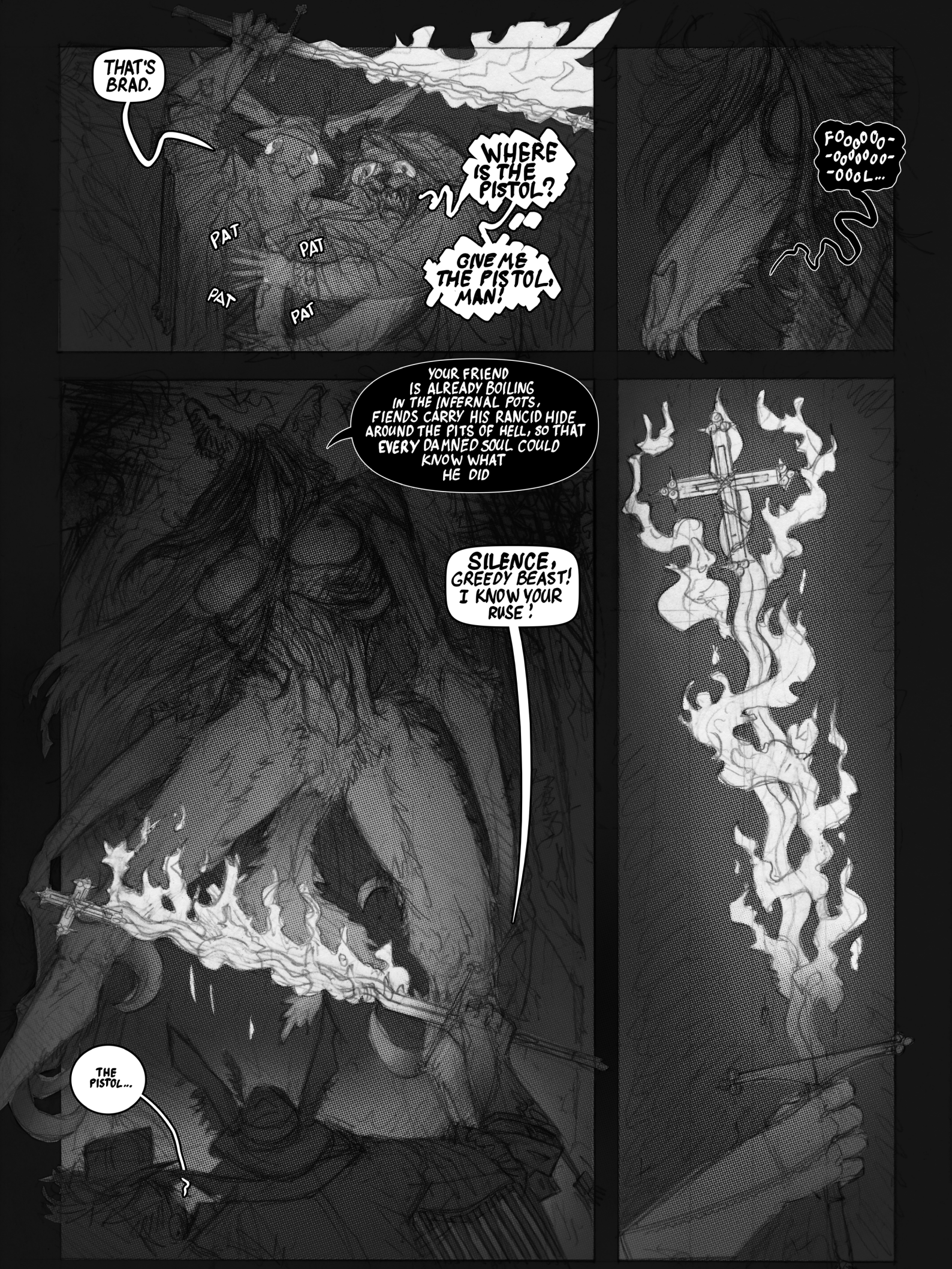
*SLANG FOR DMT

WHAT IN THE...
DAMN, I KNOW I PUT NEW BATTERIES IN
IT'S NOT BATTERIES
LOOK
BANG

SOMEONE...
GOD, I THINK THE SMELL IS GETTING WORSE
OR SOME-THING ROAMS THIS PLACE
CRACK
GUIN, PASS ME THE BOAR LURE
CHRAACXK
AND YOUR LIGHTER, QUICK!
KHRAAHCKH"
WHAT'S THAT FOR?
CRAK!

30

DUDE, I THNK THE TREES ARE MELTING...
CHIRK
KCKHHHHHRRRRR
WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT?!


THAT'S BRAD.
PAT
PAT
PAT
PAT
WHERE IS THE PISTOL?
GIVE ME THE PISTOL, MAN!
FOOOOOO-OOOOOO-OOOL...
YOUR FRIEND IS ALREADY BOILING IN THE INFERNAL POTS, FIENDS CARRY HIS RANCID HIDE AROUND THE PITS OF HELL, SO THAT EVERY DAMNED SOUL COULD KNOW WHAT HE DID
SILENCE, GREEDY BEAST! I KNOW YOUR RUSE!
THE PISTOL...

...DEMAND YOU TO YIELD BEFORE THE SACRIFICE OF OUR LORD...
...I RIGHTEOUS KNIGHT CHOSEN BY HEAVEN, ALFONSO QUESADA OF TUFTFORD...
DUDE, WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
AH, HERE IT IS
...AND FREE THE FLESH AND SPIRIT OF BRAD~
IN CASE OF DISOBEDIENCE
OOF
I, AND GUINEFORT RAWBONE, MY LOYAL...
...SQUIRE?

OOF
ENOUGH.
HIS BONES WILL MELT AND HE WILL JOIN A THOUSAND OTHER SINNERS IN THE JELLY OF COCYTUS
YOU ARE ABOUT TO KNOW PAIN SEVEN HUNDRED SEVENTY SEVEN TIMES WORSE THAN HELL
GOD FUCKING DAMN IT, I SHOULD HAVE STAYED HOME
SOULD NOT HAVE DRANK THAT SLUDGE, SHOULD NOT HAVE LET HIM IN~
XHRACK

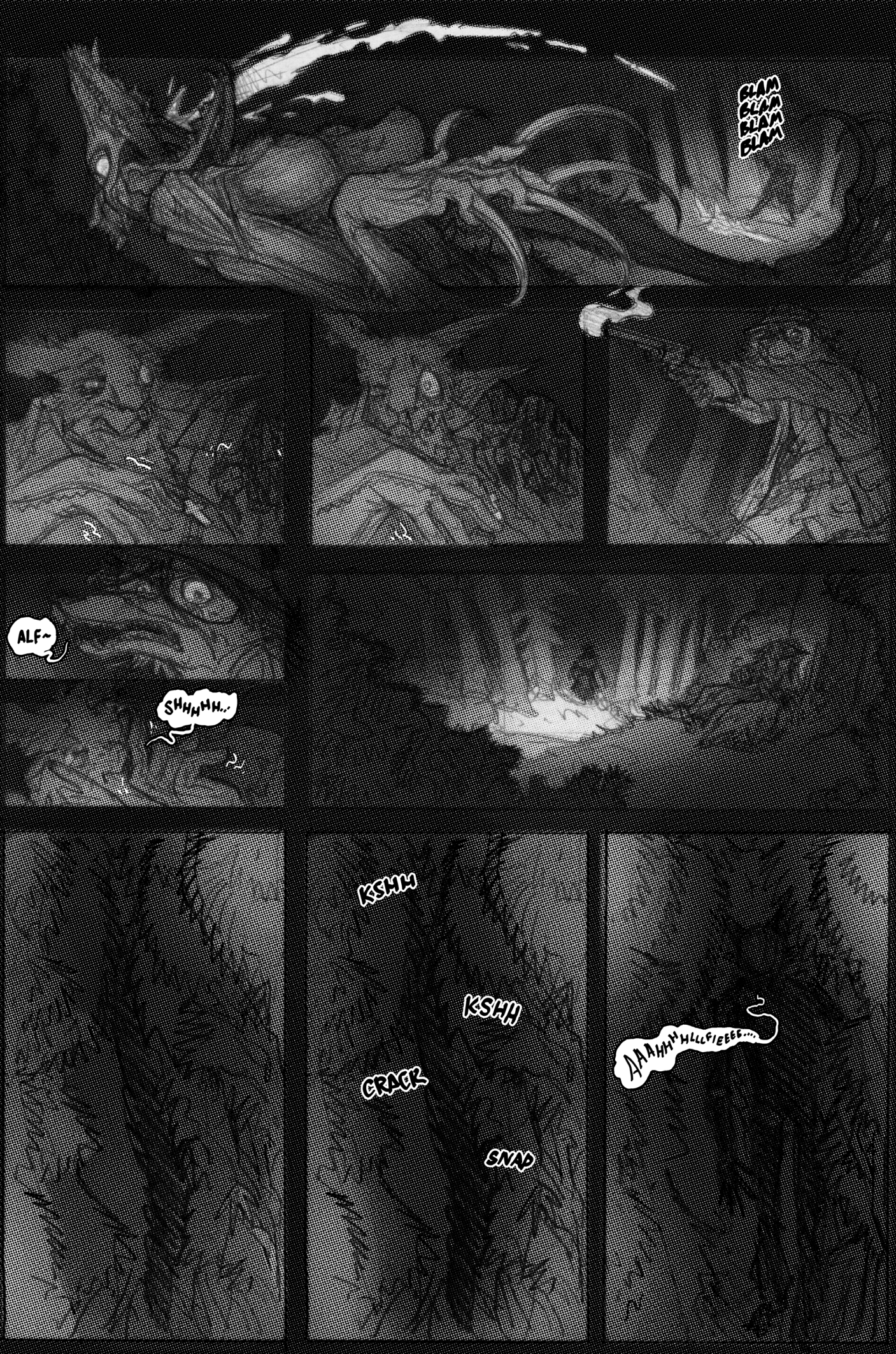
O DEATH. WHERE IS THY STING...
LIAR
...O GRAVE. WHERE IS THY VICTORY?
YOU ABANDONED YOUR FRIENDS
I COMMAND YOU TO FREE THE BODY AND SPIRIT...
YOU ABANDONED YOUR FOLK
... OF THE LORD'S SERVANT, AS ONLY HE...
WHAT THE FUCK HAVE WE GOTTEN IN TO?
AND NOW YOU WILL GET YOURS — ETERNAL SOLITUDE
... AND HE ALONE CAN OWN BRAD'S SOUL!
YOU WILL BE NOTHING
NO YOU

MY HOMIE WENT CRAZY BECAUSE OF RELIGION
OR FROM THE DOPE EVEN BEFORE THAT
DAMN IT, HOW DO YOU LOAD THIS THING?
YO, ALFIE
DO YOU ALSO SEE BOOBS ON BRAD?
OH!
YOU'RE STILL HERE?
AH!
WE GOT HIGH AND NOW SEEING GOD KNOWS WHAT
YEAH
BUT IT'S ACTUA~
WHACK
OOF
THAT'S NOT BRAD...
...THAT'S NOT A HALLUCINATON

I HAVE TO TELL HIM
TETRAGRAMMATON!
IN ITS NAME, PERFORM OBEYANCE!
YOU'R WORDS MEAN NOTHING TO ME, PALADIN
YOUR SOUL CARRIES A BURDEN OF SIN, AND YOU DID NOT REPENT
GOD TURNED HIS BACK ON YOU
NO
GOD GAVE ME EVRYTHING I WANT!

YOUR WORDS MEAN NOTHING TO ME EITHER, SPIRIT
IF YOU REFUSE TO RETURN HIS BODY...
...THEN I WILL HAVE TO DESTROY IT INSTEAD
ALFIE, IT'S NOT BRAD! WE HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE!

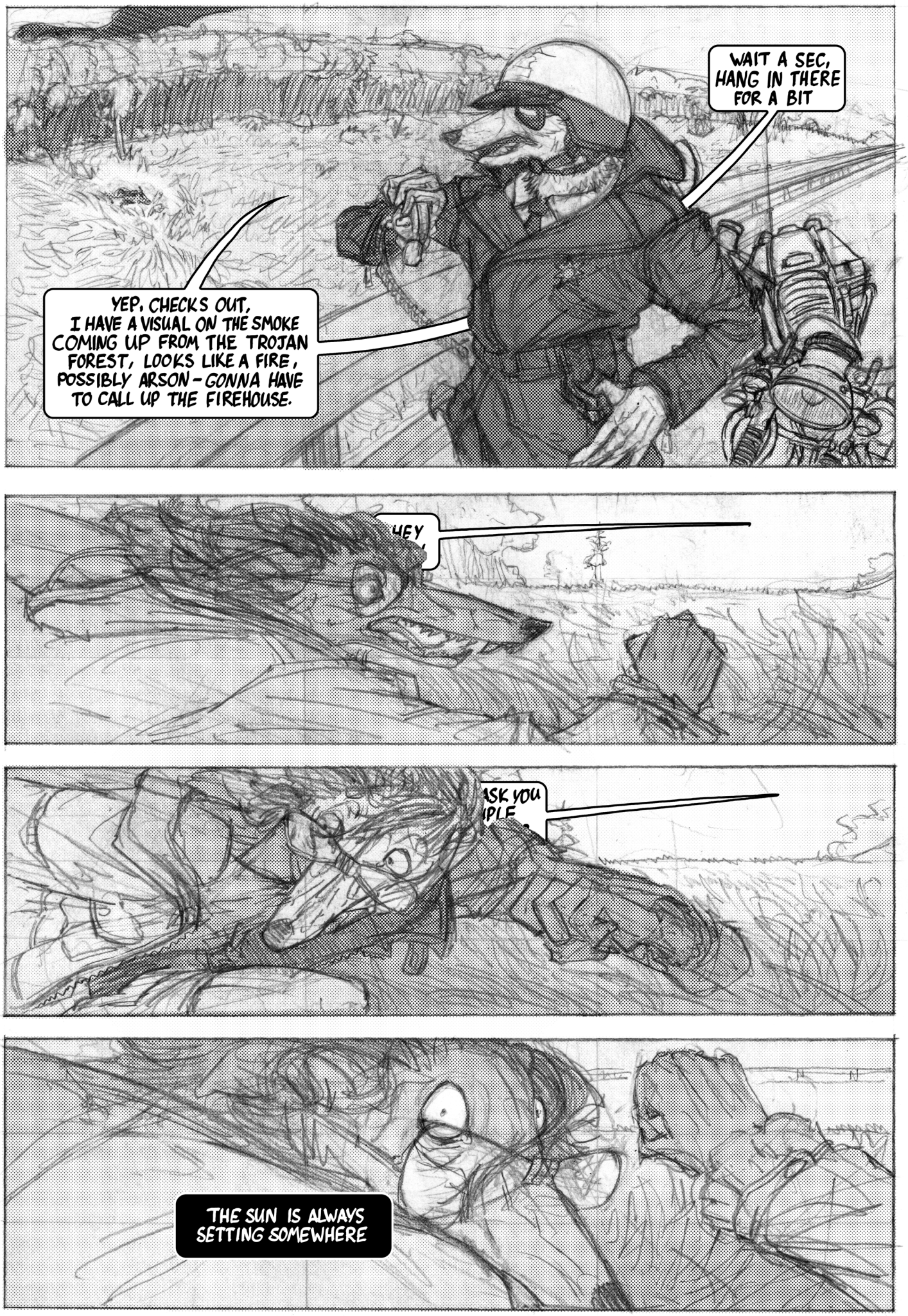
EVEN IF IT'S NOT HIM
...WE CAN'T LET THIS MONSTER LIV-AAHH!
OOOOH MAN, OOOH CRAP
YOU WILL NOT PASS THROUGH THIS NIGHT, A PLACE IN THE GRIM TRENCHES HAS ALREADY BEEN PREPARED


BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
BLAM
ALF~
SHHHHH...
KSHH
KSHH
CRACK
SNAP
AAAHHHHLLLFIEEE....

M-M-M-M-M-M-M...
Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-YYOOUU S-SSSSAAVED M-M-MMEEEEEEEE
T-T-T-T-T-T-TTTTTTHANKS-SSSSSSSSSS...
MMMMMAAANNNN
HE STUTTERS!
IT'S REALLY HIM!
BRAD
YOU CAN STOP HOLDING ME NOW
AH-AH-AYY I N-N-N-N-N-N-NNN
I KNOW.

CRACK
RUUUN
RUN
RUN,
BUT YOU
SURE CAN'T
HIDE

414


WAIT A SEC, HANG IN THERE FOR A BIT
YEP, CHECKS OUT, I HAVE A VISUAL ON THE SMOKE COMING UP FROM THE TROJAN FOREST, LOOKS LIKE A FIRE, POSSIBLY ARSON - GONNA HAVE TO CALL UP THE FIREHOUSE.
HEY
ASK YOU
THE SUN IS ALWAYS SETTING SOMEWHERE

TROJAN PYROMANIAC ARRESTED

...ICE DEPARTMENT

...RD, MA 1079

The City of Tuftford

1791 PER AQUA

...f Detective, Department of Severe Crimes

...Inspector

...RREST OF GUINEFORT RAWBONE

...olmen Jonathan Wilson, Shield #2656, and ...illam Herbert, Shield #3391, under the supervision of undersigned, report as follows.

2. On August 14, at 6:00 P.M., Guinefort Rawbone, Suspect from here on, while under the influence of drugs (see Addendum 1) approached patrolman Wilson, who was answering a call regarding a potential forest fire. After a short exchange, Suspect surrendered himself.

3. At 6:30 P.M., with help from Patrolman Herbert, Suspect was escorted to the Prescient #2 and tested for substances (see Addendum 1). After discovery of Marijuana Traces and small amounts of Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) , the Suspect was transferred to Hospital #5, while being accompanied by an officer.

4. On August 15, Suspect was declared sound of mind and transferred to the Precinct #3 for questioning. At 2:00 A.M., approximately 10 minutes after questioning started, the Suspect, Defendant from here on, requested an attorney to be present. Questioning was halted until the Attorney arrived. Defendant was transferred to a temporary holding cell.

5. On August 15, at 5:46 A.M., Victor Bobtail, Suspect's Attorney arrived at the Precinct and the questioning was continued. During the questioning, Detectives concluded that Defendant, under the influence of drug induced delirium, was present during the arson in the Trojan Forest. Defendant also claimed that his friend, Alfonso Quesada was present, as well

CONT

...ILLED FRIEND FOR GRUGS
...OR OTHER MURDERS

REMAINS FOUND NEAR THE CRIM...

TUFTFORD POLICE D...
EVIDENCE DIVIS...
(LOCATION REPOR...

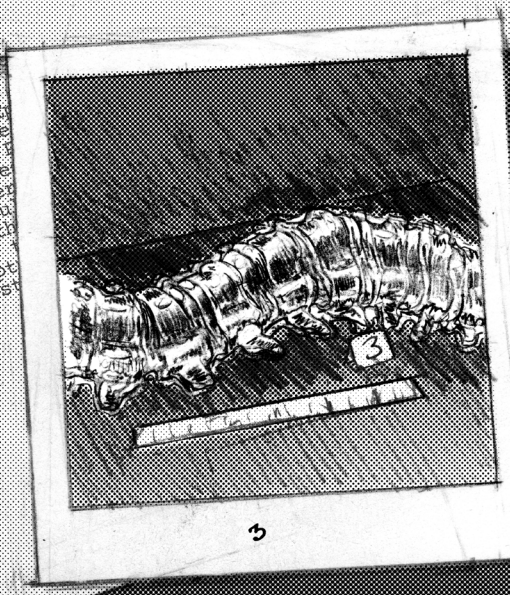
SUBJECT: Presumed portions of A. Quesada's remains

PLACE OF LOCATION: Trojan Forest, Unnamed Creek

DAT...

SUB...

Object found during the investigation of case #439584. E... center of the presumed arson was found on 14 August afte... officers received information from Suspect G. Rawbone. ... sumed remains of A. Quesada were found during the proce... widened investigation of the fire's radius. Remains wer... sent to Hospital #4 for dissection, during which a scu... shaped like a lagomorph spine was found in place of th... spine of the deceased. Further analysis performed by ... idence Division shows that the material of the sculpt... most likely to be Lead Glass, commonly known as Cryst...



3

Aron Bobcat 2026

APPENDIX

Image Credits
in order of appearance

Azon Bobcat - front and back covers, p1 disclaimer image design, p2 artwork, p5-p6 patches and logos, p7 page design, p57 header photobash (original provided by **Victor Rourke**), p137 header image edit (original art by **Hollywood**), p162 panel edit from original comic page, p201artwork, p202 photo

Savvy_Raccoon - p56 artwork

K1MANA - p135 artwork

Hollywood - p137 artwork, p148 artwork and design

Doug Hansen (presumably) - p157 comic cover

Steve Gallacci - p157 comic cover

Scott Brooks - p158 comic cover

Pat Kelly - p159 panel form original comic

Scott A. H. Huggels - p160 panels from original comic

Thanks and Acknowledgements

Azon Bobcat wishes to thank every participant who answered the call for this project, **Halcifer** and **Siik** for inspiring it, as well as his irl homies **Kranox** and **Sinisteryy**. I could not have done all of this without you guys <3

Henry Helwig thanks The server. **Tall Tales** may not be my most active community, but it never ceases to inspire me with the dedication, creativity and talent on display.

Victor Rourke wishes to thank very much their partner, their parents, and the fantastic menagerie that is **Tall Tails** for the amazing help, and support with their work! Truly, could not have done it without them, and could not have done it without their inspiration! Stay groovy!

Tabsy would like to thank his friends for their support throughout the writing process. He would especially like to thank his partner, whose love and assistance were invaluable in helping him reach the end goal.

Stooser S. would also like to thank the server, **Tall Tails**, and many of its members for their consistent support in his creative endeavours. Similarly, he would also like to thank his partner for providing constant reassurance and valuable feedback on his piece.

Classic Cheese would like to thank his lovely boyfriend **RPD** and dear friend **Wolfstride** for the support in life, and the underground gem **DEADBOLT** (2016) which was the direct inspiration for the work and how he met the two most important ones in his life.

Cake would like to thank his parents, his friends, **John Darnielle**, all the waterfalls, and V8's pomegranate blueberry flavor.

Milo wishes to thank everyone in **Tall Tails** and all it's friends and colleagues at the station for encouraging it to pursue it's artistic passions no matter what form it takes

GoneHollywood wishes to thank his friend, **DoubleHydra90**, for her unending support and enthusiasm.

Any similarities with real people or organizations are coincidental and unintentional. Members of this zine do not condone or approve of any illegal activities depicted within the written material. All rights reserved.

Tall Tails Collective 2026

NOT FOR SALE